Divergent Foundations: Rights-Based Libertarianism and the Demands of Christian Moral Theology

Kenneth J. Howell
Independent Researcher
ORCID: 0009-0003-7410-2501

Abstract

This study offers a comparative analysis of rights-based libertarian ethics (a form of deontological ethics) and Christian moral theology (a theologically grounded synthesis of deontological, teleological, and virtue-ethics), arguing that libertarianism (grounded in self-ownership, negative duties, and the primacy of individual autonomy) fails to provide an adequate account of human moral responsibility, social obligation, or the common good. Employing a theological-philosophical methodology, the research draws on close textual analysis of primary libertarian sources alongside biblical texts and patristic authors from late antiquity. The study further employs conceptual comparison and moral-philosophical analysis, structured through the FOUNDATION framework created specifically for this project, to examine each tradition's underlying anthropology, moral duties, understanding of neighbor, and orientation toward community. The analysis also incorporates basic logical evaluation, including attention to internal coherence and the principle of non-contradiction. The research aims to assess whether libertarian moral reasoning can sustain a coherent framework of interpersonal responsibility and communal life, and to evaluate whether Christian moral theology (situated within value theory as a theologically grounded form of virtue ethics) presents a fuller and more coherent ethical framework. The findings indicate that libertarianism reduces the moral/ethical life to noninterference and voluntary contract, thereby undermining the relational and communal elements essential to human well-being (i.e., a fully realized human life). By contrast, Christian moral theology (rooted in divine ownership, positive obligations of love, and the intrinsic interdependence of persons) provides a richer and more theologically grounded vision of human dignity, moral duty, and social life. The study concludes that Christian moral theology not only exposes the limitations of autonomy-centered ethical frameworks but also offers a more compelling account of the common good.

Copyright © 2026 Kenneth J. Howell
All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations in critical reviews or scholarly works.

Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from ESV.

Printed in the United States of America.

Thesis Statement

This paper contends that libertarian, rights-based ethics (herein described as being grounded in self-ownership, negative duties[1], and the primacy of individual autonomy) fails to provide an adequate account of human moral responsibility, social obligation, or the nature of the common good.[2] Therefore, by denying that one does not have an inherent responsibility for the welfare of others as well as rejecting any rightful claim upon one's labor, libertarian ethics in turn reduces the moral and ethical life to non-interference and collapses human relationships into voluntary contracts.[3] In contrast, it is proposed that the Christian moral tradition offers a much more comprehensive and compelling ethical vision, which finds its roots in divine ownership, positive obligations of love (e.g., love your neighbor as yourself), and the intrinsic and fundamental (i.e., inherent) interdependence of human beings.[4] Christian moral theology, through its emphasis on stewardship, communal responsibility, and the active pursuit of the common good, not only exposes the deficiencies and ultimate failure of libertarian moral reasoning but it also presents a richer and more theologically *grounded* framework for understanding human dignity, moral duty, and social life.[5]

Introduction

In the modern West, political discussion increasingly exhibits a clash between competing moral concepts of the human person, social responsibility, and the nature of the common good.[6] Among these competing concepts, libertarian, rights-based ethics has gained significant influence by grounding the moral life in the primacy of *individual autonomy, self-ownership, and negative duties*.[7] According to this framework, individuals bear no inherent responsibility for the welfare, thriving or success of other individuals, and in addition, no one possesses a rightful claim upon

---

[1] Going forward, negative duties are defined as moral obligations that require individuals to refrain from harming, coercing, or interfering with others rather than taking positive action on their behalf.

[2] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), for the classic articulation of self-ownership and negative rights.

[3] Murray Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: NYU Press, 1998), esp. chs. 1-2.

[4] See Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), XIX.14; Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, trans. C. Paul Schroeder (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2009).

[5] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947. II–II, q. 66, on property as stewardship rather than absolute ownership.

[6] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), on competing modern moral frameworks.

[7] Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

another's labor.[8] Within this framework, any moral obligations arise only through voluntary consent, with the highest ethical aim being the preservation of one's personal liberty against any external demands from others.[9] Although this perspective rings strongly within contemporary political debates, it nonetheless raises important questions about whether autonomy *alone* can sustain a coherent, consistent, rational, or adequate account of human moral life.[10]

The Christian moral tradition, by contrast, offers a fundamentally different understanding of the human person and the responsibilities that naturally flow from that identity. Christian moral theology, being rooted in Sacred Scripture and the theological reflections of the early Church, grounds human dignity in divine ownership and therefore frames the moral and ethical life as intrinsically relational.[11] Moral and ethical duties toward others are not acts of generosity that are just merely optional but rather positive obligations that are rooted in the love of one's neighbor, stewardship of God-given gifts, and the interdependence that is foundational in human community.[12] Therefore, instead of reducing moral and ethical responsibility to non-interference, Christian moral theology instead calls for active care, sacrificial generosity, and an active participation in the common good, all of which are concrete and practical expressions of conformity to the likeness of Christ.[13]

This paper employs the FOUNDATION framework to compare these two moral/ethical systems and to further argue that Christian moral theology provides a richer, more coherent, and more theologically grounded account of human responsibility than libertarian ethics.[14] Therefore, by examining their contrasting assumptions about anthropology, duty, community, and the purpose of the moral and ethical life, this research study demonstrates that Christian moral theology both exposes the limitations of autonomy-centered moral reasoning as well as offering a more

---

[8] Locke's labor theory of property underlies this claim; see John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), II.27-51.

[9] Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964).

[10] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), critiques autonomy centered ethics as morally insufficient.

[11] Genesis 1:27; Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

[12] Luke 10:25-37; Galatians 6:2; 1 John 3:17.

[13] Matthew 22:37-39; Acts 2:44-45; James 2:14-17.

[14] Although the proposed acronym of FOUNDATION is attributed to this researcher, the framework aligns with the broader Christian tradition's emphasis on relational anthropology; see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

compelling vision of human flourishing (i.e., one that is rooted in love, responsible stewardship, and the shared pursuit of the common good).[15]

Structure of the Paper

This paper follows the FOUNDATION framework to compare libertarian ethics with Christian moral theology. It proceeds in eleven major movements:

- Foundations of Anthropology — contrasting libertarian self-ownership with Christian relational ontology, including the nature of being, ontological reality, and the moral unit.
- Obligations — examining negative duties, rights absolutism, positive duties, and the role of consent in generating moral claims.
- Understanding of Neighbor — exploring competing moral grammars, the limits of autonomy, and the role of moral imagination in perceiving the neighbor as image-bearer.
- Nature of Labor — analyzing labor as property within libertarian ownership absolutism and labor as stewardship within Christian theology.
- Definition of the Common Good — comparing aggregative models of social coordination with relational and ecclesial visions of shared flourishing.
- Aim of Moral Life — contrasting libertarian moral minimalism with Christian accounts of virtue, teleology, and moral flourishing.
- Ties of Interdependence — assessing rugged individualism, the monadic self, relational ontology, and the social embeddedness of human identity.
- Interpersonal Responsibility — evaluating the moral claims individuals hold on one another, including the tension between negative absolutism and Christian positive responsibility.
- Orientation Toward Community — exploring libertarian anti-collectivism, soft and hard collectivism, and Christian communal life grounded in *koinonia*.
- Normative Evaluation — assessing the ontological, anthropological, and moral claims of each system and evaluating their coherence with moral reality.
- Conclusion — summarizing findings, articulating implications for Christian ethics, and identifying directions for further research.

[15] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011.

FOUNDATION Framework: A Comparative Ethical Analysis

A recurring question in contemporary political and ethical discourse concerns the extent of one's moral responsibility for the welfare, health, or flourishing of others.[16] Within certain modern moral/ethical frameworks, a common claim is that individuals bear no inherent responsibility for another person's wellbeing as well as the idea that others possess no rightful claim upon one's labor.[17] This particular moral/ethical position (which is often reframed and expressed in political language) is rooted in a specific moral tradition, namely, libertarian, rights-based deontological ethics.[18] When paired with Christian moral theology and ethics, the contrast reveals two fundamentally different views in regard to anthropologies, moral orientations, and understandings of social responsibility.[19]

F - Foundations of Moral Anthropology

Libertarian ethics typically begins with the premise of self-ownership[20] wherein the individual is understood as possessing absolute moral authority over his or her own body, labor, and resources. Therefore, it is from this starting point that any external claim upon one's labor is viewed as a violation of his or her autonomy with the argument that human beings are fundamentally independent moral agents whose obligations arise only through voluntary consent.[21]

An additional aspect of libertarian anthropology becomes apparent when one considers the cultural ideal of "rugged individualism", a narrative that is deeply embedded in the American

---

[16] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[17] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. In Nozick's framework, "labor" refers to the individual's productive capacities, actions, and efforts (i.e., the exercise of one's self-owned agency through which value is created). Nozick grounds moral life in absolute self-ownership, and thus argues that individuals possess exclusive moral authority over both their bodies and whatever they produce through their labor. Therefore, to claim a share of someone's labor is (in his view) to claim a share of the person themselves. This understanding in turn makes labor the mechanism by which property rights originate and explains why (as far as Nozick is concerned) others can have no rightful claim upon it. However, to present a sharp contrast to Nozick's definition of "labor", the Christian theological tradition understands labor not as an extension of absolute self-ownership but as a gift entrusted by God for the sake of others. Labor is therefore an expression of stewardship, ordered toward service, generosity, and the building up of the community rather than the assertion of exclusive personal dominion. In sum, Nozick's account *isolates labor* within the boundaries of individual autonomy, whereas Christian ethics *situates* labor within a relational and communal moral order in which one's abilities and efforts are directed toward the common good.

[18] Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*.

[19] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

[20] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 172-78.

[21] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

political consciousness and culture. This rugged individualism concept functions as the *social imaginary* that helps to reinforce the libertarian premise of self-ownership by painting a picture of the human person as fundamentally *self-made, self-sustaining*, and *self-sovereign*.[22] Therefore, within this cultural framework, dependence is thus seen as weakness, and relational obligations are interpreted as threats to one's personal autonomy.[23] The result that follows is that rugged individualism does not simply repeat the philosophical claim that individuals possess absolute authority over their bodies and labor, but it actually normalizes this claim by inserting it within the broader moral concept of the isolated, self-determining self. In this cultural anthropology, the human person is imagined as fundamentally autarkic (αὐτάρκης; self-sufficient, self-possessed, and morally unbound by unchosen obligations).[24] The self becomes a kind of moral monad (a closed unit) whose identity and responsibilities are defined *internally rather than relationally* in which it stands in sharp contrast to the biblical and Christian theological understanding of the human person.

However, Christian moral theology begins from a different premise with the concept that the human person is not self-owned but God-owned[25] since humanity is created in the image of God and therefore entrusted with gifts, abilities, and resources that are to be stewarded rather than possessed absolutely.[26] This theological anthropology frames humanity in a multi-faceted way as relational, communal, and accountable to divine authority[27] and that the self is not an isolated moral unit but a member of a larger body (e.g., community) that is called to love and serve others.[28] Indeed, as some have observed, all that ultimately really matters are relationships with other people.[29]

---

[22] See Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23-30. Taylor uses the term "morally independent". However, this researcher has a penchant for alliteration and therefore substitutes with the term "self-sovereign". In both cases, the meaning remains the same although some minor commentary may be warranted: for example, in libertarian anthropology, the concepts of moral independence and self-sovereignty converge in that the individual is both the sole source of moral obligation and the exclusive authority over their own person and labor, therefore, leaving no room for inherent duties to others.

[23] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 142-48.

[24] Ibid., for the cultural ideal of the autarkic, self-sufficient individual, see Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 142-48.

[25] Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

[26] Genesis 1:27.

[27] Rothbard, *Ethics of Liberty*, ch. 2; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

[28] Augustine, *City of God.* Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Classics, 2003. XIX.14.

[29] Informal discussion with psychologist Carey S. Edney, Ph.D., at a nonprofit mental health clinic.

Therefore, Christian moral theology begins not with self-ownership but with divine ownership which is seen as being grounded in the biblical affirmation that humanity is created *imago Dei* ("in the image of God", בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים, *beṣelem ʾĕlōhîm*; Gen 1:27).[30] The Hebrew term *ṣelem* (צֶלֶם) conveys the idea of a visible representation or embodied reflection of a greater reality[31] thus, the human person is not an isolated, self-originating agent but rather a creature whose very being is derivative, relational, and oriented toward God. In other words, to be "image" is to be from Another, for Another, and with others.

The New Testament extends this relational ontology through the language of κοινωνία (koinōnia), i.e., communion, participation, a life shared rather than possessed,[32] and that human beings are created not for solitary autonomy but for communion (with God and with one another). St. Augustine captures this well in *City of God* XIX.14, where he argues that true peace and flourishing arise *only within rightly ordered relationships of love* (*ordo amoris*).[33] Therefore, according to Augustine, the human person is inherently *socialis*, that is, a being whose identity is constituted through relationships of mutual giving and receiving, and autonomy severed from communion is, for him, a distortion of human nature.

Furthermore, Christian anthropology insists that human beings have accountability not just to themselves but also to God and their neighbor for "The Great Commandment" ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου, *agapēseis ton plēsion sou*) presupposes that one's neighbor is not a voluntary moral consideration but an intrinsic dimension of one's own moral identity.[34] The Greek term πλησίον (*plēsion*) does not mean "someone I choose to engage

---

[30] Genesis 1:27.

[31] See the semantic range of ṣelem in standard Hebrew lexicons such as HALOT. The Hebrew term ṣelem (צֶלֶם) denotes a visible representation or embodied reflection of a greater reality, indicating that humanity's identity is derivative (not self-generated), relational, and oriented toward God rather than self-originating.

[32] Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3.

[33] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14.

[34] Matthew 22:37-39. In the cultural world of Second Temple Judaism, Jesus' command to "love your neighbor as yourself" carried a meaning far more radical than modern readers often recognize. Within Jewish tradition, "neighbor" (רֵעַ, *rēaʿ*) was commonly understood as referring primarily to one's kin, community, or fellow members of the covenant people, and thus any moral obligation was therefore largely in-group oriented, being shaped mainly by ethnic, religious, and social boundaries. When Jesus pairs Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and declares the love of neighbor to be "like" the love of God, he shattered these inherited boundaries and in turn redefined the scope of moral concern. His use of *plēsion* (πλησίον, "the one who is near") demonstrated that the neighbor is not limited to one's *tribe, class, or chosen associations but includes anyone whose need intersects one's life.* In the broader Greco-Roman world (for example where moral excellence was often associated with self-mastery, status, and reciprocal relationships), Jesus' teaching radically challenged cultural norms by making unconditional, non-reciprocal care the defining mark of the moral life. Historically, Jesus' words dismantled both Jewish boundary-ethics and Greco-Roman honor-based ethics, and thus replaced them with a universal, boundary-crossing obligation that made the neighbor an unavoidable and immediate moral claim rather than a voluntary or selective concern.

with" but rather "the one who is near," the one whose presence places a claim upon me.[35] Thus it stands in direct tension with the libertarian insistence that obligations arise only through voluntary consent.

In biblical thought, the human person is also fundamentally dependent (i.e., not in the pejorative, harsh or critical sense rejected by rugged individualism, but in the theological sense of being sustained by God and embedded within a network of mutual responsibility) as shown by the Hebrew concepts עָבַד (*ʿābad*, "to serve") and שָׁמַר (*šāmar*, "to keep/guard") in Genesis 2:15 which frames human labor not as an assertion of self-sovereignty but as an act of stewardship within God's world.[36] In short, one's labor is relational, covenantal, and oriented toward the flourishing of others.

Therefore, where rugged individualism elevates the *autonomous self* (αὐτόνομος, *autonomos*, "a law unto oneself"), Christian moral theology affirms the *ecclesial self*, the person whose identity is shaped by belonging (i.e., to God, the Body of Christ, and to the human community as a whole).[37] And thus the Christian vision of the person is therefore irreducibly relational, communal, and accountable, and ultimately grounded in the triune God whose own life is eternal communion (περιχώρησις, *perichōrēsis*).[38]

In sum, the cultural anthropology of rugged individualism (centered on the isolated, self-determining self) cannot be reconciled with the biblical and theological vision of humanity as *imago Dei*, created for *koinōnia*, ordered by *agapē*, and sustained through stewardship and mutual responsibility. Christian moral theology thus exposes the inadequacy of autonomy-centered frameworks by grounding human identity in the relational, covenantal, and communal nature of God's creation.[39]

O - Obligations and the Nature of Moral Duties

---

[35] On *plēsion* as "the one who is near," see Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "πλησίον."

[36] Genesis 2:15.

[37] Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

[38] On *perichōrēsis* as the mutual indwelling of the Trinity, see John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa,* I.14 in *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, translated by Frederic H. Chase Jr. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958.

[39] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 72-78.

Within libertarian ethics, moral duties are primarily negative and therefore, individuals are obligated not to harm, coerce, or infringe upon the rights of others. However, they are not morally required to provide assistance, support, or resources to others unless they voluntarily choose to do so. The absence of coercion is the central moral concern. [40]

Rugged individualism also reinforces the libertarian conviction that moral obligations must be *chosen* rather than *inherent*. Within this cultural philosophy, the moral life is pictured as a sphere of voluntary commitments freely entered into by autonomous agents, and any claim that one might owe something to another person (apart from *explicit* consent) is treated as an infringement on one's personal liberty.[41] This in turn reinforces the libertarian distinction between negative and positive duties by reframing *unchosen* responsibilities as being morally illegitimate.[42] It is therefore in this way that rugged individualism functions as a type of cultural amplifier of libertarian ethics, shaping moral intuition toward the belief that one's life, labor, and resources are exclusively one's own unless voluntarily shared.[43] Christian moral theology, however, challenges this assumption by grounding moral obligation not in consent but in divine command and the inherent dignity of the neighbor, thereby affirming that some duties (especially those of love, mercy, and care) are binding regardless of personal preference.[44]

The Christian moral tradition refuses this narrowing of the moral life in that Scripture does not merely prohibit harm; it repeatedly summons believers to concrete acts of mercy, generosity,

---

[40] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 30-33.

[41] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 145-47.

[42] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 30-33.

[43] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 27-31. This researcher's commentary (not Rand) is that libertarian ethics draws a sharp distinction between negative duties (obligations not to harm, coerce, or interfere) and positive duties (obligations to help, assist, or provide for others). However, within this framework, only negative duties are considered morally binding because they do not impose unchosen claims on a person's life or labor. Therefore, any responsibility that arises without voluntary consent is reframed as being morally illegitimate. For example, a libertarian may argue that while one must not push a drowning person into the river (a negative duty), one is not morally required to rescue the drowning person unless one has previously agreed to do so (a positive duty). Rugged individualism amplifies this logic culturally by reinforcing the intuition that unchosen obligations are inherently suspect, thereby shaping people to believe that their life, labor, and resources belong exclusively to them unless they freely decide otherwise. This position exposes a deeper inconsistency within rights-based libertarianism in that if the drowning person's life possesses sufficient moral weight to prohibit harming them, it is difficult to explain why that same moral worth generates no obligation to intervene when their life is imperiled. However, this view contradicts itself in that it says the person's life matters enough that you must not hurt them, yet not enough that you should help them when they are in danger. Both claims cannot be true at the same time. If their life has value, then ignoring their need is not morally neutral; if their life has no claim on you, then even the rule against harming them loses its foundation. Rugged individualism reinforces this contradiction by teaching people that any unchosen responsibility is illegitimate, encouraging the belief that one's life, labor, and resources belong only to oneself unless freely given.

[44] Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 22:37-39.

and mutual care. In this vision, love is not optional benevolence but the very form of Christian existence.[45] This positive obligation is demonstrated in the noteworthy "Good Samaritan" narrative given by Jesus wherein he exemplifies moral responsibility to include things such as intervention, sacrifice, and concrete acts of mercy.[46] Early Christian Father such as Basil the Great and John Chrysostom emphasized in their writings that wealth, labor, and ability are entrusted by God for the sake of others, and not solely for one's personal use.[47] Thus, the Christian ethical tradition frames moral life as inherently relational and outward-facing, that is to say, a person's moral life is never just about private virtue or individual autonomy. Who one is and what one is called to do are *always understood in relation to others*. A person's responsibilities naturally extend outward (e.g., toward neighbors, the vulnerable, the community, and ultimately the whole Body of Christ; and while the former refers to all of humanity, the latter of which refers to the body of Christians, yet some would argue that this too encompasses all of humanity). Thus, moral goodness cannot be reduced to non-injury. It takes shape in the concrete practices of love, e.g., in bearing burdens, offering hospitality, and seeking the flourishing of one's neighbor.

As this research paper moves forward, it is essential at this juncture to distinguish the ethical theory and system of situational "love" as was promoted by Joseph Fletcher from the Christian moral tradition's understanding of *agapē*.[48] In Scripture and Christian theology, *agapē* is a virtue grounded in the character of God, ordered toward the good, and expressed through stable moral commitments that do not contradict divine command.[49] In contrast to this, Fletcher's "love" is a content-minimal, situationally defined principle whose meaning shifts from case to case ("situationism") and whose moral demands cannot be known apart from the immediate circumstances.[50] Fletcher's redefinition of "love" not only diverges sharply from the Christian ethic but also renders his system logically incoherent in the following sense: by claiming that

---

[45] Matthew 22:37-39; Galatians 6:2.

[46] Luke 10:25-37.

[47] Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*; John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*. Translated by Catharine P. Roth. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.

[48] Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966). Joseph Fletcher was an American Episcopal priest, theologian, and ethicist best known for developing Situation Ethics, a mid-20th-century ethical theory that attempted to replace traditional moral rules with a single guiding principle: *do the loving thing*. His work became both highly influential and highly controversial in both theological and philosophical circles.

[49] See 1 John 4:7-12; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23-27, on charity as a theological virtue ordered toward God and the good.

[50] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 26-30.

"love" is the sole absolute while at the same time denying that love possesses any fixed or universal content, Situation Ethics requires love to be both absolute and non-absolute in the same respect, and therefore, a direct violation of the principle of non-contradiction.[51] To analyze this further, because Fletcher insists that love may require actions traditionally judged immoral (e.g., lying, adultery, killing, etc.) while at the same time still maintaining that love is always morally good, his system collapses the very distinction between good and evil that it presupposes.[52] Fletcher's system collapses under its own logic in that it demands a definition of love in order to discern its moral demands, yet simultaneously insists that love's meaning cannot be known apart from those very demands. The result is an ethic that cannot ground its own first principle.[53] Thus, Fletcher's situational "love" actually undermines the possibility of coherent moral judgment, whereas Christian *agape* (rooted in divine nature, teleological order, and consistent moral obligations) actually retains both logical coherence and theological integrity,[54] that is, it actually retains the coherence that Fletcher's situational "love" lacks.[55]

U - Understanding of Neighbor

Libertarian ethics views the neighbor as a rights-bearing individual whose autonomy must be respected but who has no claim on one's labor or welfare.[56] Obligations arise only through consent, and moral responsibility ends with non-interference. In other words, in this particular framework and idea, moral obligations arise only through voluntary consent, and one's responsibility toward others is *exhausted by the duty not to harm or interfere*. The neighbor is therefore understood primarily as a boundary to be respected rather than a person to whom one owes positive care, and therefore, it leaves the moral life oriented toward non-involvement rather than active concern or solidarity.

---

[51] Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 121-25.

[52] Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 120-34.

[53] Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, 124-26.

[54] Augustine, *City of God*, XV.22; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 23; Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 72-78.

[55] Consider a scenario in which someone hides a vulnerable friend from an aggressor. When the aggressor asks, "Is your friend here?", traditional Christian ethics affirms both the duty to protect the innocent and the obligation to uphold truthfulness, evaluating the act within a coherent hierarchy of goods rooted in God's character. Fletcher, however, argues that only one norm ("love") is absolute, and all other moral rules are relative. In this case, he would say that lying is morally required *if* it seems to produce the most loving outcome, yet because Fletcher defines love *entirely by the situation* (e.g., situational and subjective), the content of "love" inevitably shifts from case to case, ultimately leaving no stable criterion by which to determine what love actually *is* or what it actually *demands*.

[56] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.27-51.

On the other hand, Christian moral theology views one's neighbor as someone to whom one owes active love.[57] Here we reference again The Good Samaritan teaching that illustrates that moral responsibility includes concrete acts of care, generosity, and sacrifice.[58] The neighbor is much more than just a rights-bearing individual but a person whose wellbeing is bound up with one's own moral life. In Christian moral theology, the call to love one's neighbor means that one's character, virtue, and faithfulness *are measured in part by how one responds to the needs of others*. The neighbor is therefore not a boundary to be respected at a distance but a real, concrete person whose well-being becomes a genuine moral concern, this of which in turn shapes and reveals the quality of one's own discipleship. When Christian moral theology says that "the neighbor's well-being is bound up with one's own moral life," it is echoing Jesus' teaching that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable.[59] A true follower of Christ does not "measure" faithfulness *by private belief alone but by the shape of their life toward others* (especially the vulnerable, the overlooked, and the wounded). In the Gospels, discipleship is always outward-moving such as feeding the hungry, tending the sick, forgiving enemies, bearing burdens, and showing mercy. These are not presented as an option but rather as concrete expression of Christlike love. In essence, one's relationship with God is revealed in how one treats the people God places in one's path.

N - Nature of Labor, Property, and Stewardship

In libertarian thought, as has been previously noted, labor is exclusively one's own[60] and therefore, others have no rightful claim to it, and redistribution (whether by the state or by moral

---

[57] Romans 13:8-10. Here Paul teaches that love fulfills the law because it seeks the genuine good of the "neighbor." Sociologically, this reframes the basis of communal life, so instead of relying on external rules to restrain harm, Paul grounds social cohesion in a positive obligation of love that promotes trust, responsibility, and mutual care. Anthropologically, Paul expands the idea of "neighbor" beyond someone's kinship, ethnicity, or social status, thus reflecting a view of human beings as relational creatures whose dignity and well-being are interconnected. In this sense, loving one's neighbor is not merely an emotional posture but a way of structuring human relationships so that every person's good is honored.

[58] Luke 10:25-37.

[59] In Jesus' teaching, the commands to love God and to love one's neighbor are inseparable because genuine devotion to God necessarily expresses itself in concrete concern for others (Matt 22:37-40; 1 John 4:20-21). Sociologically, this unites worship and social life in that one's love of God is not a private sentiment but a force that shapes how communities treat the vulnerable, maintain trust, and pursue justice (Luke 10:25-37). Anthropologically, Jesus expands "neighbor" beyond one's kinship, ethnicity, or social boundaries, grounding human worth in the shared dignity of all people made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27; Luke 6:27-36). Therefore, to love God is to honor that divine image in others, and to love one's neighbor is to participate in the relational orientation toward God for which humans were created (1 John 3:16-18).

[60] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.

expectation) is seen as coercive.[61] Property rights are therefore grounded in self-ownership and voluntary exchange. From this perspective, one's moral life is built around protecting the one's sphere or domain of control rather than directing one's abilities or resources toward the needs of others. Therefore, any expectation that one's labor should serve communal purposes is immediately treated as an infringement on one's personal autonomy, since obligations arise only through explicit consent. The consequence follows in that the moral significance of labor is confined strictly to the individual who actually produces it, and severed from any inherent social or relational responsibilities that might in some way call that labor into service for the common good of humanity.

The Christian moral tradition frames labor and property differently: within the concept of stewardship.[62] What any one person possesses is not owned *absolutely* but entrusted by God for the sake of service, generosity, and the building up of others.[63] Early Christian writers frequently warn against hoarding resources and emphasize the moral responsibility to care for the poor.[64] St. Basil the Great's assertion that "the bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry" reflects this same theological concept (i.e., that property is not merely personal but relational and oriented toward the needs of the community).[65] In other words, material goods are always held with an open hand, so to speak, and the measure of their faithful use is found not in accumulation but in how effectively they meet the needs of others. Stewardship therefore transforms labor and property from instruments of private autonomy into a means of participating in God's redemptive work, binding the believer's moral life to the well-being of one's neighbor and the flourishing of the whole community. Thus, when we talk about God's redemptive work we need to understand that it encompasses both the spiritual restoration of humanity and the healing of the world's brokenness. Regarding the spiritual, redemption mainly involves reconciling people to God through the forgiveness of sins, the renewal of the heart, and the restoration of the divine image (*imago* Dei) so that individuals may love and live in communion with God. From a humanitarian perspective, this same redemptive purpose extends *outward into the concrete realities of human life*, calling

---

[61] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

[62] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 66.

[63] Deuteronomy 15:7-11. When we say something is not owned "absolutely" in Christian ethics, we mean that a person does not possess it with unlimited, unconditional, or self-originating authority. "Absolute ownership" implies total control, independent of any higher claim, purpose, or accountability. Christian theology in turn rejects that idea.

[64] Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*.

[65] Basil, *On Social Justice*, Homily on Luke 12.

believers to participate in God's work of justice, mercy, and compassion by raising up the poor, protecting the powerless, and promoting peace and reconciliation among people. Therefore, in the Christian moral tradition, these two dimensions *are inseparable* for the inward transformation wrought by God then naturally expresses itself in outward acts of love, which in turn makes the care of one's neighbor a visible sign of participation in God's ongoing work to renew and restore all things.

D - Definition of the Common Good

Libertarian ethics defines the common good as the aggregate or collective result of individuals freely pursuing their own interests[66] and since obligations arise only from consent, there is no inherent duty to promote communal welfare. This culminates with social responsibility being viewed as voluntary rather than morally required. In this type of framework, the moral life is oriented toward the goal of protecting individual autonomy over cultivating mutual care, and thus the wellbeing of others becomes a matter of personal preference rather than a shared moral commitment. Therefore, the outcome is a picture of society in which cooperation and generosity may occur, yet only as optional expressions of individual choice and not as expressions of a deeper moral bond or communal obligation.

A careful distinction must be made at this juncture between collectivism *as a political ideology* and *collective moral responsibility* as affirmed within Christian moral theology. Although Christian theology rejects authoritarian collectivism, it nevertheless does insist that the common good is a shared moral reality[67] that cannot be reduced to the sum of individual pursuits.

---

[66] Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 107-12.

[67] When we talk about a "moral reality," we are saying that it is a common moral framework that exists outside any one person's opinions, shaping what a community understands as right, wrong, owed, and required. In ontological terms, this means that moral truths are not merely psychological states or social conventions but features of the moral order that exist independently of individual preference. They have *being* (a kind of moral ontology) in that they exert real claims upon us whether or not we acknowledge them. For example, if we share a moral reality, then commands like "don't murder," "don't lie," "care for the vulnerable," and "respect human dignity" are not merely personal preferences, opinions or subjective sentiments but are real moral claims that bind us both, shaping how we are responsible to one another. In other words, these duties arise from what *is*, (i.e., from the nature of persons, the structure of human relationships, and the moral order woven into reality itself) rather than from what any one individual happens to feel or choose. Therefore, in Christian moral theology, "what is" in the moral order is ultimately grounded in the very being of God, whose nature is the source of all moral truth, and because God is goodness, justice, and love (and not merely the giver of moral commands) moral reality reflects God's own character. Human beings participate in this reality by being created *imago Dei*, which means that moral responsibility is woven into their very nature. Our capacity to know, desire, and act for the good is an analogical sharing in God's moral being. Thus, duties (e.g., truthfulness, justice, and care for the vulnerable) are not arbitrary rules or subjective preferences but rather are

Libertarian voluntarism, grounded in self-ownership and negative duties, treats social cooperation as optional and contingent upon personal choice.[68] In contrast to this, Christian solidarity reflects a form of *communal moral collectivism* (not political coercion), and that there is a recognition that human flourishing is inherently interdependent and that individuals bear real obligations toward the well-being of others.[69] This concept aligns with Augustine's account of a rightly ordered society and also Aquinas's definition of the common good as a good belonging to both the whole and each part[70] showing that Christian moral theology understands the common good as a shared moral project in which believers are called to bear one another's burdens, seek the good of their neighbor, and contribute to the flourishing of the community. Therefore, the common good is not merely the aggregate type collection of individual pursuits but rather a moral reality grounded in justice, charity, and solidarity, and a good that both shapes and is shaped by the active participation of all.

A - Aim of Moral Life and Ultimate Orientation

Libertarian ethics is oriented toward maximizing individual liberty and minimizing coercion.[71] The highest moral value is autonomy, and the ethical life is defined by freedom from imposed obligations. Here moral responsibility is limited to respecting boundaries rather than engaging in the needs of others, and the suffering of one's neighbor imposes no inherent claim on one's time, resources, or concern. Therefore, the result is a view of a moral life in which autonomy is primary (if not exclusive), and the bonds that tie individuals together are thus reduced to bonds and/or relationships that are voluntary, fragile, and easily dissolved. This stands in sharp contrast to the relational and theologically grounded moral vision of Christian moral theology, a difference that becomes evident when the two are compared directly.

Table 1. Comparative Table: Libertarian Ethics vs. Christian Moral Theology (Col 3:12-14)

Feature	**Libertarian Ethics**	**Christian Moral Theology (Col 3:12-14)**

expressions of the divine nature mirrored in human life. In short, moral obligation arises from ontology, that is, from who God is and from who we are as creatures made in God's image.

[68] David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 81-89.

[69] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 107-12. Philippians 2:3-4; Acts 2:44-45.

[70] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 90.

[71] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ix-x.

Primary Orientation	Maximizing individual liberty and minimizing coercion.	Love, sacrifice, and communion.
Highest Value	Autonomy: Freedom from imposed obligations.	Charity (Agapē): Conformity to Christ; the "bond of perfection".
Identity Grounding	Self-ownership and independent agency.	Ontological: Believers are "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved".
View of Relationships	Voluntary & Fragile: Bonds are reduced to consent or contracts.	Relational Being: Selfhood is constituted through belonging to a new family.
Moral Responsibility	Limited to respecting boundaries; neighbor's suffering imposes no inherent claim.	Rooted in identity; flows naturally from belonging to God and others.
Social Framework	Competitive, honor-shame structures or individualist autonomy.	A "thick social body" with new communal norms arising from God's life.
Key Virtues	Personal responsibility and industry.	Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.
Function of Forgiveness	Optional; based on personal preference or contract.	Essential practice is patterned after God's own forgiveness.
Ultimate Freedom	Freedom from obligation: The right to be left alone.	Freedom for love: Self-giving service that mirrors Christ.

Christian moral theology is oriented toward love, sacrifice, and communion[72] in which the highest moral value is charity (*agapē*), and the ethical life is defined by conformity to Christ.[73] However, this love is not in a vacuum but rather exercised within the real context of human relationships, and it is here that virtue formation (e.g., humility, patience, generosity, justice, etc.)

[72] 1 Corinthians 13:1-7.

[73] Romans 8:29. Rugged individualism says you may choose whether to help the drowning person, whereas in Romans 8:29 the apostle Paul is essentially saying that you are being shaped into the One who always moves toward the suffering, the vulnerable, and the needy. Christ's image leaves no room for optional love since Christ's life is the perfect expression of agapē (self-giving, other-oriented love). Therefore, if we are shaped into His image, then love becomes the central moral reality of our lives. In sum, agapē creates a shared moral reality in which if the goal of human life is Christ-likeness, then moral obligations are not private, love of neighbor is not voluntary, and responsibility is not self-chosen as agapē binds us to others because Christ is bound to others.

shapes the believer's engagement with others and with society.[74] In Colossians 3:12-14, the apostle Paul grounds the moral life in a transformed ontology in which he begins not with commands but rather with identity stating that believers are "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," a triadic designation that functions as an ontological re-location of the self.[75] In sociological terms, Paul is redefining the believer's *primary group identity*, in that he is shifting them from the competitive, honor-shame structures of the Greco-Roman world into a new communal body whose new norms arise from them now participating in God's own life rather than from voluntary consent.[76] So, when Paul says that when someone becomes a Christian, he is saying that their main identity no longer comes from those social pressures but instead, they become part of a new kind of family, one that is a community shaped by God's character and God's love. In sum, this new way of living does not come from people choosing to join a club or signing a contract but rather it comes from sharing in God's own life.

In other words, Christians don't create this community by their own agreement; God creates it by drawing them into His life. Their moral responsibilities (e.g., compassion, forgiveness, love) are not optional or based on personal preference, but rather they flow naturally from who they now are as people who belong to God and to one another.

---

[74] Cf. Colossians 3:12-14.

[75] This author uses the term "triadic designation" to help point out several important insights in the following way: triadic designations are remarkably prevalent throughout the Old and New Testaments, appearing in divine titles, human identity markers (as in this Colossian passage), virtue lists, and liturgical formulas, in which they carry deep cultural significance within the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world. More than just casual literary feature, triads functioned as identity-forming, memory-anchoring, and socially performative devices that communicated completeness, stability, and communal belonging. In a culture that was more "oral dominant", triads served as powerful mnemonic structures (they were small enough to memorize while at the same time rich enough to convey theological depth) while also signaling a sense of fullness or established reality, since the number three symbolized completion in Semitic thought (e.g., In Hebrew narrative patterns, "the third day" (בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, bayyôm haššəlîšî) consistently marks the moment when a process reaches its completion, fulfillment, or decisive turning point. This is not incidental as it reflects a broader Semitic symbolic logic in which three represents the movement from tension to resolution). Anthropologically, triads operated as social identity markers that located individuals within a covenant community rather than as isolated moral agents, reflecting the collectivist nature of ancient Mediterranean societies where the self was defined through group membership, kinship, and shared narrative. Thus, when Scripture uses triadic formulas such as "chosen, holy, beloved" (Col 3:12), "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9), or "faith, hope, and love" (1 Cor 13:13), it is not merely describing virtues or statuses but constituting a communal identity, shaping the moral imagination, and grounding ethical obligations in a stable, covenantal ontology (i.e., an account of human identity in which personhood, purpose, and moral obligation arise from covenantal belonging to God and to the community rather than from autonomous self-definition). In this cultural context, triads carried performative power in a way that they declared who a people were, how they belonged, and what kind of life they were called to embody, making them central to the Bible's theological anthropology and its vision of relational, covenant-rooted moral life.

[76] Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

This identity shift is anthropologically significant in that it reframes the human person not as an autonomous moral agent but as a relational being whose selfhood is constituted through belonging. Paul is saying that people are not defined by their independence but by their relationships (i.e., who they belong to and who they are connected with).[77] The Greek terms that Paul carefully uses (ἐκλεκτοί (eklektoi, "chosen"), ἅγιοι (hagioi, "holy"), and ἠγαπημένοι (ēgapēmenoi, "beloved") signal divine initiative, consecrated distinctiveness, and received worth, respectively.[78] These triadic terms, put together, in essence establish that Christian moral theology emerges from *being* before it expresses itself in *doing*. In other words, Paul grounds ethics in ontology, that is, who believers are (being) determines how they live (praxis).[79]

Paul's skillful use of metaphor is seen in his exhortation to "put on" (ἐνδύσασθε, *endysasthe*) the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience which conjures up the imagery of re-clothing the self (a metaphor that resonates with not only ancient Mediterranean anthropology but also contemporary group psychology).[80] A key cultural concept in antiquity was clothing and personal attire as it would often signify one's social role, status, and communal belonging and therefore, Paul's metaphor signals not a private moral adjustment but the adoption of a new *social identity script*.[81]/[82]Virtue becomes not an optional moral accessory but

---

[77] The fuller point is richer than simply saying "relationships matter." In many modern (and especially libertarian) frameworks, the human person is viewed as a self-contained individual who makes choices independently (i.e., an "autonomous moral agent" whose identity is self-generated). In contrast, however, both biblical and anthropological perspectives understand the person as *fundamentally relational*, shaped by the communities, bonds, and networks of belonging that form them. In this view, one's very selfhood is not something invented in isolation but something that emerges through connection (e.g., through belonging to others, being embedded in a community, and participating in shared life).

[78] BDAG, s.v. "ἐκλεκτός," "ἅγιος," "ἀγαπημένος."

[79] When we say that "being comes before doing," we mean that a person's actions naturally flow out of their identity, what theology calls ontology (who we are) and what ethics calls praxis (how we live). Thus, ontology (being) precedes and grounds praxis (doing), or to put it another way, who we are, and to whom we belong, determines how we live.

[80] Jerome H. Neyrey, *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990)

[81] A social identity script is the shared set of expectations a community gives its members about who they are and how they should live, functioning like a cultural storyline that tells people what roles they occupy, what behaviors are appropriate, what counts as honorable or shameful, how they should relate to others, etc. In the ancient Mediterranean world (where identity was shaped far more by group belonging than by individual choice) these scripts were powerful forces that formed a person's sense of self. So when Paul gives believers a new identity and new virtues to "put on," he is effectively giving them a new social identity script, that is, a new way of understanding themselves and a new pattern of life that matches their belonging to God's people.

[82] Paul's exhortation does not slide into collectivism because his account of community is rooted in covenantal participation in Christ, not in the absorption of the individual into the group. More specifically, collectivism submerges personal agency, flattens individuality, and treats the person as valuable only insofar as they serve the interests of the collective. Paul, however, does the opposite when he affirms that each believer is personally chosen, sanctified, and beloved (Col 3:12), endowed with distinct gifts (1 Cor 12), and accountable before God as a moral

the habitual expression (ἕξις, *hexis*) of a renewed nature shaped by participation in Christ.[83] Each virtue Paul listed is inherently relational (i.e., it is directed toward the other) and functions as what sociologists call *pro-social behaviors*, or the practices that sustain group cohesion and mutual trust.[84]

These virtues go from mere discussion and exhortation to a more concrete reality through communal practices such as "bearing with one another" (ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων, *anechomenoi allēlōn*) and "forgiving one another" (χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς, *charizomenoi heautois*), actions that are explicitly patterned on God's own forgiveness towards us. From the perspective of group psychology, these practices are essential mechanisms that help maintain group stability, repair relational fractures, and prevent the escalation of conflict.[85] Ultimately, they transform the community from simply being a collection of individuals into what anthropologists describe as a *thick social body,* that is, a group bound by shared moral commitments, reciprocal obligations, and a common narrative of identity.[86]

This vision culminates with love, ἀγάπη (*agapē*), which Paul refers to as "the bond of perfection" (σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος, *syndesmos tēs teleiotētos*).[87] When Paul uses the Greek term σύνδεσμος ("bond") he is evoking a picture of anatomical ligaments and social ties, therefore suggesting that love is the "connective tissue" that holds the community together. In sociological terms, *agapē* functions as the community's highest integrative/consolidative norm, ordering all the other virtues into a coherent whole and orienting the group toward unity, peace, and mutual

---

agent. In other words, the community does not erase the person, but instead it creates the conditions in which the person can grow as a human being. Yet at the same time, Paul rejects the opposite error (radical individualism) when he insists that identity is relational and that believers belong to one another in Christ. However, this belonging is not coercive or totalizing. On the contrary, it is *participatory rather than possess*ive, grounded in divine love rather than state power, and oriented toward mutual upbuilding rather than uniformity. Paul's vision preserves both personal dignity and communal responsibility, thus avoiding the extremes of libertarian autonomy on one side and collectivist absorption on the other.

[83] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999. II.1-6, on ἕξις as habituated virtue.

[84] Jonathan H. Turner, *Human Institutions: A Sociological Theory*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

[85] Colossians 3:13. Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong," *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995).

[86] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*. (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[87] Colossians 3:14.

flourishing.[88] In other words, love is not just a mere emotion but a structuring principle that shapes the community's moral imagination[89] and patterns its collective life.

Thus, Colossians 3:12-14 presents a moral ontology in which divine identity shapes human identity, and human obligations arise from who God is and who we are as creatures renewed in the image of Christ. In this theological and ethical framework, relational responsibility is not an optional moral enhancement or boost, but rather an intrinsic dimension of Christian existence specifically, and the greater human existence in general. Therefore, Paul's vision integrates anthropology, sociology, and theology into a unified account of the moral life revealing a life in which the renewed self is always a *relational self*, and the renewed community is a living embodiment of God's reconciling love.[90]

Ultimately, Christian moral theology, in an existential way, does not seek freedom *from* obligation but freedom *for* love (a freedom expressed in self-giving service that mirrors Christ's own life and binds the believer to the well-being of his or her neighbor).

T - Ties of Human Interdependence

Libertarian ethics views human beings as fundamentally independent,[91] and thus obligations arise only through consent, and non-involvement in another's suffering is morally permissible and justifiable so long as one does not cause harm. Therefore, within the libertarian-rights view, all moral responsibility is basically limited to avoiding interference, while not addressing need, and the predicament or dilemma of others imposes no inherent claim on one's time, resources, or concern. This results in a moral framework in which autonomy reigns supreme and the bonds between persons remain strictly voluntary rather than being morally binding. This underlying tension between libertarian autonomy and Christian interdependence becomes even more apparent when applied to concrete moral questions that expose the limits of a purely voluntaristic ethic.

---

[88] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

[89] When we use the term "moral imagination" we define this as the virtue-shaped capacity to perceive and interpret the world through a moral lens, enabling individuals and communities to envision what love, justice, and the good require in concrete situations.

[90] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

[91] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

The apparent choice between rugged individualism and collectivism is itself a false dilemma, as it assumes that moral and political life must be organized around one of two opposing extremes, one being either the isolated, self-sufficient individual who owes nothing to others, or the other being the incorporating of the person into a totalizing collective.[92] In reality, however, these categories function as caricatures when presented as mutually exclusive options as human beings are neither wholly autonomous nor wholly absorbed into the group. They are in fact simultaneously individual and relational, possessing personal agency while at the same time also existing within networks of interdependence, inherent responsibility, and inevitable vulnerability.[93] Christian moral theology makes this point explicit by affirming both the dignity of the individual *and* the inherent interdependence of persons, and in turn rejects the reductionism of either extreme.[94]

Therefore, identifying the dilemma as false actually helps to clarify that the real contrast is not between individualism and collectivism per se, but rather between an anthropology that denies unchosen obligations and one that recognizes that moral responsibility arises from the very nature of human relationality.[95]

Table 2. Comparative Summary: Rugged Individualism, Extreme Collectivism, and Christian Moral Theology

Feature	**Rugged Individualism**	**Extreme Collectivism**	**Christian Moral Theology**
Core Emphasis	Self-sufficiency, personal autonomy, and self-ownership.	Subordination of the individual to group goals or needs.	Individual dignity (*imago Dei*) integrated with interdependence.
View of Obligation	Voluntary and primarily negative (noninterference); unchosen duties are illegitimate.	Externally imposed and enforced rather than relationally grounded.	Grounded in divine command and the intrinsic worth of the neighbor.

[92] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23-30.
[93] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 142-48.
[94] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14; Romans 12:4-5.
[95] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 72-78.

Social Relations	Neighbor is a boundary to respect; cooperation is optional and preference-based.	Persons are reduced to functional units within a larger whole.	Neighbors are persons to whom one owes care through love and solidarity.
Common Good	Presupposes social structures while denying any debt to them.	Something enforced rather than freely pursued by individuals.	A shared moral project rooted in mutual responsibility and justice.
Ownership & Agency	Dependence is seen as a weakness; ownership is absolute.	Risks erasing personal agency and individual moral responsibility.	Labor and property are seen as stewardship; agency is used for service.
Critique/Failure	Collapses by presupposing the social structures it claims individuals do not owe.	Denies the individual dignity and agency required for moral accountability.	Avoids extremes by balancing personal agency with relational obligation.

The contrast between rugged individualism and collectivist moral assumptions becomes especially clear in contemporary debates over healthcare. Rugged individualism interprets healthcare as a private good, *accessible through personal effort and market exchange*, and therefore rejects the notion that society bears inherent responsibility for meeting the medical needs of others[96] while on the other hand, collectivist frameworks view healthcare as a shared social responsibility grounded in the recognition of universal vulnerability and interdependence.[97] It is this tension that in turn exposes the deeper anthropological divide between libertarian ethics (which denies unchosen obligations) and Christian moral theology which affirms that human beings are bound together in networks of mutual care.[98] It is because illness, fragility, and

[96] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 30-33.

[97] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 41-45.

[98] Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:4-5. These two passages together ground the Christian claim that human beings are bound into networks of mutual care by uniting ontology and obligation. Ontologically, Romans 12:4-5 teaches that believers are "one body in Christ, and individually members one of another," meaning that human identity is inherently relational rather than autonomous (persons are constituted through belonging, not self-possession). This relational ontology then generates moral obligation since members share one life, they necessarily share one another's needs. Galatians 6:2 makes this explicit by commanding believers to "bear one another's burdens," presenting positive, active care as the fulfillment of "the law of Christ." (i.e., the law of love). Thus, Christian moral theology holds that mutual responsibility is not a voluntary choice but a moral demand arising from the very nature of who human beings are in Christ. Ontology (being members of one body) and obligation (bearing one another's burdens) are therefore

dependence are *unavoidable features of human life*, healthcare has thus become a focal point of contemporary moral and political debate precisely because it exposes the underlying anthropological assumptions of rights-based moral frameworks by forcing the question of whether moral responsibility can be reduced to voluntary choice or whether, as Christian moral theology insists, the needs of others generate real and binding claims upon us.[99] Therefore, healthcare serves as an especially illuminating case study since it lays bare the underlying anthropological assumptions of rights-based moral frameworks and highlights the sharp contrast between a voluntarist ethic of autonomy and a Christian vision of interdependence, inter-standing, and inter-obligation.

To begin with, within libertarian ethics moral obligations arise only through voluntary consent, and therefore individuals bear no inherent responsibility for the wellbeing of others.[100] However, the issue of healthcare necessarily presupposes *shared vulnerability, a relationship of interdependence, and the moral significance of human need(s)*. Thus the issue then forces the question of whether individuals owe anything to one another simply by virtue of being members of a shared human community.[101] For this reason, healthcare thus becomes a type of "symbolic battleground" showcasing that to affirm that society bears responsibility for ensuring access to care is to affirm that some obligations are inherent rather than chosen, and therefore a claim that directly challenges the libertarian premise that autonomy is the highest moral value.[102]

---

inseparable, forming a vision of the moral life in which interdependence, solidarity, and concrete acts of love are essential rather than optional.

[99] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 72-78.

[100] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 30-33.

[101] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. Taylor's analysis of modern identity helps to shed light on why healthcare exposes the limits of autonomy-centered ethics. Here Taylor argues that the modern self is often imagined as independent and "buffered," thus obscuring the relational and vulnerable dimensions of human life. Healthcare, however, presupposes *precisely those features* (i.e., shared fragility, interdependence, and the moral significance of human need). Both illness and vulnerability are universal and non-optional conditions of human existence, and therefore healthcare, in simple terms, forces the question of asking whether we owe something to other people even if we never agreed to it, simply because we all share the same basic human condition. Put in a slightly different way, do responsibilities come only from what we *choose* (e.g., like contracts and promises) or do some responsibilities come from the fact that we are all vulnerable, at times dependent, and living together in the same human community? In this sense, healthcare becomes a test case for whether moral responsibility can be reduced to individual autonomy or whether, as Taylor suggests, the self is always already constituted within networks of relation that generate real moral claims. To put it another way, it means that who we are is shaped by our relationships from the very beginning, that is, we do not become ourselves in isolation, and since our lives are formed within the context of relationships (e.g., families, communities, and shared social worlds), those relationships *naturally create real responsibilities*. In other words, we owe things to one another not just because we choose to, but *because our lives are intertwined from the start*.

[102] Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, chs. 1-2. Neither Nozick nor Rothbard uses the language of "symbolic battlegrounds" in their respective works. The term this author chose to use functions as an analytic description of how

In addition, healthcare requires collective action in ways that strain the logic of radical individualism that is found in rights-based libertarianism. The modern healthcare system (or systems) depends on pooled resources, shared risk, a public health infrastructure, and coordinated responses to crises, [103] and, therefore, these realities show that no individual, regardless of strength or self-reliance, can secure their own well-being in isolation. Illnesses, disabilities, and a whole host of various medical needs are obviously part of the universal human experience that in turn cannot just simply be reduced to things such as personal failure or private misfortune.[104] However, within rights-based ethics framework, the idea that one person's need might generate a moral claim on another's resources is thus viewed and treated as coercive, a violation of self-ownership, or an illegitimate imposition on personal liberty.[105] Thus, as was previously pointed out, healthcare becomes a flashpoint because it exposes the limits (if not the outright failure) of autonomy-centered moral reasoning in that it reveals that human beings are not self-sufficient units but relational creatures whose flourishing depends on mutual care.[106]

---

debates over healthcare expose the tension between their self-ownership frameworks and any claim that unchosen, inherent social obligations exist. Therefore, healthcare becomes a "symbolic battleground" because it forces people to confront a basic truth about human life (i.e., everyone eventually gets sick, everyone is vulnerable at some point, and no one (except an extreme minority) can meet all of their medical needs alone. If we say that society has a responsibility to make sure people can get care, we are also saying that some responsibilities exist whether or not we personally agreed to them. In other words, we owe certain things to each other simply because we live together and share the same human vulnerabilities. This directly challenges the libertarian idea that the only real moral obligations are the ones we freely choose. If healthcare requires shared responsibility, then autonomy cannot be the highest or only moral value, because meeting real human needs sometimes requires cooperation, mutual support, and obligations we did not individually consent to.

[103] Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 45-52.

[104] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999). MacIntyre emphasizes that human beings are not autonomous, self-sufficient agents but vulnerable creatures whose lives are marked by dependence at multiple stages, and therefore, illness, disability, and the wide range of medical needs that arise across a lifetime are not signs of personal failure or private misfortune but *predictable features of the human condition*. For MacIntyre, these shared vulnerabilities reveal that *dependence is a normal part of rational animal life, and they ground the moral claim that communities owe one another forms of care, support, and mutual responsibility.*

[105] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 172-78.

[106] Globally, no dataset measures exactly what percentage of people can pay for *all* healthcare needs out-of-pocket across their entire lifespan, but the best available evidence makes clear that the number is extremely small (most likely well under 10 to 15 percent and close to zero in many regions). Worldwide income data show that more than half the global population lives on less than seven dollars a day, while WHO and World Bank reports indicate that billions face catastrophic or impoverishing health expenditures each year, even when paying only a portion of their medical costs. High out-of-pocket spending rates in low-income countries correlate strongly with delayed care, medical debt, and untreated illness, demonstrating that most people cannot shoulder the full financial burden of healthcare on their own. Even in wealthy nations, major medical events routinely exceed personal savings, further underscoring that lifetime self-funding is unrealistic for the vast majority of people. These indicators paired together show that only a small minority of the world's population could *plausibly* pay for all healthcare needs independently, reinforcing the broader ethical point that human beings are not self-sufficient units but vulnerable, interdependent creatures whose well-being often depends on shared systems of support. World Bank, *Poverty and*

The debate over healthcare goes even deeper by revealing the existential and theological tensions within certain strands of extreme right-wing and Christian nationalist rhetoric. In these particular frameworks, bodily *autonomy* can often be framed economically (e.g., "my labor is mine") while bodily *control* is framed morally (e.g., "my body must conform to God's law").[107] Yet, healthcare policy intersects with not just one issue (making it simplistic) but rather an array of issues (e.g., sexuality, reproduction, sex/gender, disability, end-of-life/hospice care, etc.) thus making it a type of proxy or representation for broader and additional anxieties that tie into authority, moral order, and the boundaries of communal responsibility.[108] For some individuals and/or groups, government-supported healthcare (either partial or universal) is interpreted not merely as a policy disagreement but as a threat to a particular viewpoint of moral agency, family structure, or even divine hierarchy.[109] Therefore, as a result, healthcare becomes a site where political ideology and theological anthropology *merge together*, in which it often reinforces the libertarian claim that charity must be voluntary and that the state has no rightful role in promoting the welfare of the vulnerable.[110]

Yet, with this all being said, the most fundamental reason healthcare becomes a point of contention is that it exposes the truth that human beings are inherently dependent since illness and

---

Shared Prosperity 2022: Correcting Course (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022), especially global income distribution tables; World Health Organization and World Bank, *Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2023 Global Monitoring Report* (Geneva: WHO, 2023), on catastrophic and impoverishing health expenditures; World Health Organization, *Global Health Expenditure Database*, accessed January 4, 2026, for out-of-pocket spending indicators; Human Rights Watch, "Global Health: The Human Right to Health," accessed January 4, 2026, on the impact of low public funding on access to care.

[107] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne* (New York: Liveright, 2020).

[108] Ibid.; see also Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). As Perry and Whitehead show, policy debates often function as stand-ins for deeper cultural and moral anxieties. Healthcare is a clear example in point for it does not touch only one discrete issue but intersects with a wide range of contested domains making it a proxy for broader concerns about authority, moral order, and the proper scope of communal responsibility (as noted in this research paper). Although Perry and Whitehead study politically charged topics, they are best understood not as partisan authors but as sociologists of religion whose work *analyzes the empirical relationship* between religious identity and political behavior rather than advocating for a particular ideological program.

[109] Perry and Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God*. For these two authors, "divine hierarchy" refers to the belief that God has ordered society in a fixed, unequal structure (typically with men over women, Christians over non-Christians, heterosexuals over LGBTQ people, and "traditional" families over other household forms). This hierarchy is understood not as a human arrangement but as part of God's intended moral order. In their analysis, appeals to "divine hierarchy" help explain why certain policy debates (such as those involving healthcare, sexuality, gender, reproduction, or family life) become charged symbolic conflicts for they are perceived as challenges to what is believed to be a God-given social structure.

[110] Perry and Whitehead supply the analysis of healthcare as a proxy for deeper cultural anxieties; Hauerwas provides the account of human vulnerability and communal dependence. The concluding claim about healthcare reinforcing libertarian views of voluntary charity is the author's synthesis of these frameworks.

vulnerability reveal that the self is not an isolated moral unit but a relational being whose life is intertwined with the lives of others. In this sense, healthcare becomes a point of contention precisely because it reveals the relational nature of the self and exposes the fiction of the isolated moral agent (an exposure that *unsettles* political frameworks built on radical individualism). This claim draws directly on Hauerwas's account of human beings as vulnerable, dependent creatures whose lives are sustained through networks of care rather than autonomous self-sufficiency.[111] As one psychologist has observed, "all that ultimately really matters are relationships with other people."[112] This insight is not merely a sentimental claim but a recognition of the psychological, ontological, and existential dimensions of human life. Psychologically, human beings are formed and sustained through relational bonds; ontologically, the person is constituted through relation rather than isolated autonomy; existentially, meaning arises through encounter, responsibility, and shared life.[113] Healthcare thus makes these truths unavoidable by showing that moral responsibility cannot be reduced to noninterference and that the well-being of others is not merely a matter of personal preference but a reflection of the shared conditions of human existence.

For these aforementioned reasons, healthcare serves as a powerful case study revealing the inadequacy of libertarian ethics and the coherence of Christian moral theology. Therefore, where libertarianism sees only voluntary association, Christian moral theology sees inherent interdependence; where libertarianism limits responsibility to non-harm, Christian moral theology recognizes positive obligations of love; where libertarianism treats suffering as morally irrelevant unless chosen, Christian moral theology insists that the needs of others place a real claim upon the believer.[114] Healthcare thus becomes not merely a policy debate but a window into the deeper

---

[111] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

[112] Informal discussion with psychologist Carey S. Edney, Ph.D., at a nonprofit mental health clinic. The following analysis reflects the author's interpretation and is not attributed to Edney. This is more than just a philosophical claim, or subjective opinion. On the contrary, to say that "all that ultimately really matters are our relationships with other people" is to make a claim with psychological, ontological, and existential weight. Psychologically, human beings are formed, stabilized, and sustained through relational bonds in that our identity, emotional regulation, and sense of belonging emerge through connection rather than isolation. Ontologically, the human person is not a solitary, self-contained unit but a being constituted through relation (i.e., one whose very mode of existence is shaped by dependence, mutual recognition, and a shared life). Existentially, meaning itself arises in and through encounter, in other words, it is in commitments, responsibilities, and the presence of others that life acquires depth, purpose, and moral seriousness. Taken together, these dimensions reveal that relationships are not merely beneficial additions to human life but *the primary context in which the self becomes coherent, in which moral agency takes shape, and in which the fullness of human existence is realized.*

[113] For a fuller discussion of these dimensions, see the extended commentary in previous footnote.

[114] Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*; John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*. This claim aligns closely with the patristic witness, particularly in Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, both of whom argue that human vulnerability creates real, non-optional obligations of care. For Basil, the needs of the sick and poor constitute matters

anthropological divide between autonomy-centered ethics and relational moral theology in that it showcases that human beings are not self-enclosed individuals but members of a shared moral community whose flourishing depends on mutual care, solidarity, and the active pursuit of the common good.

In unison, these dynamics reveal that libertarian ethics thus cannot account for the inherent interdependence of human life (especially in contexts of vulnerability and need) and that this failure highlights the necessity of a relational moral framework, i.e., one that recognizes that human beings are bound to one another in ways that autonomy alone cannot explain.

Table 3. Comparison of Libertarian Ethics and the Christian Moral Tradition (ethics) of Basil the Great & John Chrysostom

Feature	**Libertarian Ethics**	**Basil the Great & John Chrysostom**
View of Moral Agents	Fundamentally independent and self-sufficient	Inherently dependent and relational
Scope of Responsibility	Limited to non-harm and voluntary association	Includes positive obligations of love, mercy, and justice
Significance of Suffering	Morally irrelevant unless caused by another's coercion	Morally significant as it reveals shared humanity
View of Charity	Optional benevolence, not an obligation	Non-optional, grounded in divine justice
Social Needs (e.g., Healthcare)	Private matters	Communal responsibilities

Comparative Summary

of justice grounded in our shared nature, as reflected in his establishment of the *Basileias* (Basil the Great's groundbreaking social-welfare complex in fourth-century Caesarea, and it is often described as the first large-scale hospital system in Christian history). Chrysostom likewise insists that the suffering of others places a genuine claim upon the believer, since the poor are "our own members" within the body of Christ. Together, their theology underscores that healthcare reveals the inadequacy of ethical systems built on radical individualism and affirms the Christian conviction that love entails positive, communal responsibility.

To summarize the contrast emerging from the preceding analysis:

a. Libertarian ethics treats human beings as fundamentally independent, with moral obligations arising only through voluntary consent.
b. Real-world contexts such as healthcare reveal the inadequacy of this framework, demonstrating that human life is marked by vulnerability, dependence, and shared responsibility.
c. Christian moral theology offers a coherent alternative by grounding human identity in relational interdependence and affirming that love of one's neighbor entails concrete, positive obligations of care.

Taken together, these tensions reveal the inadequacy of both extremes and point toward the need for a more coherent account of the human person, ideally one that can sustain both individual dignity *and* the relational responsibilities that healthcare debates make impossible to ignore. From psychological, sociological, and theological perspectives, the Christian moral framework offers a more coherent and humane alternative to the extremes of both rugged individualism and collectivism.[115] From a psychological perspective, both extremes distort basic human needs in that rugged individualism denies the formative role of attachment and belonging, while collectivism suppresses agency and personal identity (needs that are essential for healthy human development).[116] From a sociological perspective, each extreme undermines the conditions necessary for stable communities in that rugged individualism erodes social trust and shared norms, and collectivism stifles dissent and moral responsibility, and in turn produces conformity rather than genuine solidarity.[117] Finally, from a theological and anthropological perspective, Christian moral theology provides the strongest account by grounding human dignity and interdependence in the *imago Dei*, affirming that persons are *simultaneously* unique and relational, created for communion with God and one another.[118] Therefore, it is this dual affirmation that in turn resolves the contradictions inherent in both extremes and further offers a vision of the common good that is rooted not in voluntarism or coercion but in the very structure of human existence as relational, responsible, and oriented toward mutual flourishing.[119]/[120]

---

[115] Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 45-52.
[116] Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: Norton, 1980), 94-101.
[117] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19-22.
[118] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14; Genesis 1:26-27.
[119] Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 81-89.
[120] For further illumination and example, John 15:12 unites ontology and obligation. Here Jesus does not ground the command to love in voluntarism ("love if you choose") nor in coercion ("love by external force"), but in

In contrast to the libertarian viewpoint, Christian moral theology views human beings as *fundamentally interdependent*[121] since all persons (regardless of whether they are Christian or not) bear the *imago Dei* and therefore belong to one another in the Body of Christ (in a large, existential way and not necessarily referring to the Church). Thus, moral responsibility extends beyond non-harm to active care,[122] and willful non-involvement in the face of suffering can be morally blameworthy (as previously noted in Jesus' critique of those who pass by the wounded man in the Good Samaritan parable).[123] Consequently, Christian moral theology explicitly rejects the idea that moral responsibility ends with non-interference, insisting instead that love of one's neighbor requires concrete engagement with the needs of others.

I - Interpersonal Responsibility and Relational Ethics

Regarding interpersonal responsibility, libertarian ethics treats this as voluntary and contractual, thus relationships do not generate inherent moral claims unless freely chosen.[124] According to this view, the mere fact of being in proximity to others (or even being part of the same society) does not in any way create obligations beyond respecting their rights. Whatever duties there may be, they only arise when an individual explicitly consents to them, yet even then, they are limited to whatever agreed upon terms the parties come up with. As a consequence, relationships between two persons (or parties) carry no intrinsic moral weight beyond simply binding the agreement only to the extent that one has chosen to be bound. This approach thus reduces interpersonal responsibility to simply a matter of personal and/or selfish preference and contract, as opposed to recognizing any natural or communal claims that others might have upon one's concern, resources, or involvement. In sum, this severs moral responsibility from the inherent structure of human community, and in effect, treats moral obligations as optional add-ons rather than as realities that arise from the shared conditions of human life.

---

the very structure of human existence as re-created in him. Because disciples share in Christ's own life (e.g., his vine-and-branches ontology) they are inherently relational, called into responsibility for one another, and oriented toward mutual flourishing. The command to "love one another" flows directly from who they are in him, not from contractual choice. Thus, John 15:12 reinforces the idea being put forth that Christian moral theology resolves the contradictions of individualistic extremes by rooting the common good in the relational nature of human life as shaped by Christ's love.

[121] Romans 12:4-5.

[122] 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

[123] Luke 10:25-37.

[124] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.95-99.

Christian moral theology approaches interpersonal responsibility differently as intrinsic to human identity[125] thus viewing relationships (e.g., family, community, church, etc.) as justifiably carrying moral weight since they reflect God's relational nature.[126] Therefore, love of one's neighbor is not optional but fundamental of Christian discipleship. In other words, since human beings are created for communion, the needs of others place a real claim upon the believer, and genuine faith is demonstrated through active concern for the vulnerable and the suffering. In this way, therefore, interpersonal responsibility becomes a defining mark of the Christian moral and ethical life and demonstrates that to follow Christ is to participate in God's ongoing work of caring for and restoring the human family (and not just select individuals).

James 2:14-17 presents a forceful argument that faith without concrete action is "dead," in which the writer (James) uses the example of a hungry and unclothed neighbor who receives only pious words but not any material help. This passage not only pushes forward a theological claim but also resonates with anthropological insights into human relationality and with the ethical foundations of contemporary social work practice.[127] James proposes a world in which human beings are fundamentally relational, embedded in networks of reciprocity, obligation, and mutual care.[128] It is in this sense that the failure to respond to a neighbor's material need is not just a spiritual deficiency but an actual breakdown of the reciprocal social bonds that sustain human communities.[129] The field of anthropology further affirms that even the basics of food, clothing, and shelter are cultural universals necessary for survival and personal human dignity, and thus James's example of unmet basic needs reflects what anthropologists describe as subsistence-level

---

[125] James 2:14-17. Here James reinforces the Christian conviction that interpersonal responsibility is not optional but integral to what it means to live faithfully before God. James insists that faith without works is dead, illustrating his point with the example of a believer who encounters a brother or sister in need yet offers only words of goodwill rather than concrete help. For James, such a response is not merely inadequate, but a contradiction of genuine faith. This passage assumes that the needs of others place a real claim upon the believer, *not because of a voluntary contract but because of the shared identity rooted in the imago Dei and the communal life formed in Christ*. In other words, Christian ethics approaches interpersonal responsibility as intrinsic to human identity. To belong to God is to belong to one another, and therefore love must take the form of tangible care. James's critique makes clear that authentic Christian faith necessarily expresses itself in active concern for the wellbeing of others, revealing that moral responsibility is woven into the very fabric of Christian existence.

[126] Hebrews 13:16. This verse urges believers not to neglect doing good and sharing with others, because such acts are pleasing to God. The writer of Hebrews assumes that care for others is not an optional add-on but a built-in expression of who we are as God's people.

[127] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 229-31.

[128] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 1990), 3-18.

[129] Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 50-72.

vulnerability, where survival depends on communal responsiveness.[130] Therefore, James's critique is anthropologically grounded in that a faith that refuses to participate in the material reciprocity necessary for human flourishing is in fact socially dysfunctional. In addition, anthropology also emphasizes that identity is not just internal but also is performed through embodied practices, rituals, and behaviors.[131] In other words, James makes the same point by insisting that faith is not validated by just verbal affirmation alone but by an embodied action that in effect, makes love of neighbor concrete.[132]

The Epistle of James, and more specifically this particular passage, also aligns closely with the ethical foundations of social work. The Social Work Code of Ethics is built on core values such as service, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, and social justice.[133] James's condemnation of "empty words" that ignore suffering, in effect, mirrors these commitments, as the contemporary social work profession requires action-oriented compassion rather than sentiment alone.[134] In essence, James' scenario mirrors the basic structure of social work practice such as assessment (identifying hunger and lack of clothing) and intervention (providing food and clothing). Therefore, the failure that James describes from first century antiquity is nothing more than a failure of responsive practice, that is, recognizing the need of another, yet refusing to intervene.[135] In basic social work terms, this constitutes an ethical violation *because it prioritizes good intentions over meaningful service*.[136] Additionally, social work also emphasizes the role of structural forces (e.g., poverty, inequality, systemic barriers, etc.) in shaping human vulnerability,[137] and so James's example reflects such structural deprivation, where the community's response actually determines whether the vulnerable person survives.[138] In sum,

---

[130] Conrad Kottak, *Cultural Anthropology*, 18th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2021), 42-45. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 125-30.

[131] Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3-30.

[132] Johnson, *Letter of James*, 234-36.

[133] National Association of Social Workers, *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (Washington, DC: NASW Press, 2021).

[134] Frederic G. Reamer, *Social Work Values and Ethics*, 6th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 44-47.

[135] Kirst-Ashman and Hull, *Understanding Generalist Practice*, 9th ed. (Boston: Cengage, 2021), 112-15.

[136] Reamer, *Social Work Values and Ethics*, 52-54.

[137] Lena Dominelli, *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 23-29.

[138] Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010), 27-33.

James' vision is not some kind of paternalistic charity but a communal responsibility, which aligns with social work's emphasis on empowerment, mutual aid, and community-based care.[139]

In tandem, James 2:14-17 articulates a holistic anthropology as well as a proto–social work ethic.[140] The passage assumes that human beings are created for interdependence, that human dignity requires meeting material needs, and that genuine faith is validated through embodied care. In this interdisciplinary blend, a community that claims faith but neglects the vulnerable is in effect spiritually, socially, and morally disordered.

O - Orientation Toward Community and Society

For libertarian ethics, society is a collection of independent agents whose cooperation is based on mutual advantage and thus prioritize autonomy over communal identity, [141] and therefore, relationships are more instrumental rather than formative (i.e., they exist to facilitate individual goals as opposed to shaping one's moral identity or generate inherent obligations). In this view, social bonds do not carry any intrinsic moral claim beyond the benefits they may provide, and so once those benefits cease, the relationship itself therefore has no enduring ethical weight (i.e., there is no more moral commitment or obligation once the mutual "agreement" or "contract" concludes). In the end, this framework treats community as a voluntary association of self-directed individuals rather than a moral reality that shapes who persons are or what they owe one another.

In stark contrast to libertarian ethics, Christian moral theology prioritizes communal belonging, grounding its vision of human life not in autonomous individuals but in a people constituted as a σῶμα (*sōma*, "body").[142] The Church is not a voluntary association of self-directed agents but a living organism whose members are intrinsically united in identity, purpose, and destiny. This vision is articulated most clearly in St. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian church, where he situates Christian moral life within the unity and interdependence of the Body of Christ.

Paul urges believers to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling," expressed in Greek as περιπατῆσαι ἀξίως τῆς κλήσεως (*peripatēsai axiōs tēs klēseōs*).[143] This phrase does more than just

---

[139] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 66-75.

[140] In the context of antiquity, a proto–social work ethic refers to the ancient philosophical and religious foundations that preceded the formalization of social work as a modern profession. While "professional ethics" did not exist in the ancient world, many core principles used by social workers today find their origins in classical thought.

[141] Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*.

[142] Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

[143] Ephesians 4:1.

command moral behavior, it also calls for an entire mode of life shaped by God's calling. The virtues that follow (e.g., ταπεινοφροσύνη (*tapeinophrosynē*, humility), πραΰτης (*prautēs*, gentleness), μακροθυμία (*makrothymia*, patient endurance), and ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων ἐν ἀγάπῃ (*anechomenoi allēlōn en agapē*, "bearing with one another in love") are inherently relational,[144] therefore, none of which can be meaningfully practiced in isolation for each one presupposes relationship with others (i.e., a shared life), mutual vulnerability, and sustained engagement with others.

Paul then grounds this moral exhortation in a profound theological confession when he writes, "one body and one Spirit… one Lord, one faith, one baptism."[145] The repeated use of the Greek εἷς (*heis*, "one") stresses the indivisible unity of the Christian community in that believers are members of μία ἐκκλησία (*mia ekklēsia*, "one Church"), who are formed and sustained by the Spirit.[146] Thus, Christian identity is fundamentally communal, and not individualistic where the Church is not a marketplace of competing interests but a κοινωνία (*koinōnia*, fellowship, mutual participation) in which believers share life, burdens, and responsibility.[147]

This communal orientation is further illuminated by the New Testament's use of συνεργεία (*synergeia*, cooperative participation), which describes the cooperative work of believers with one another and with God.[148] In a similar fashion, φιλαδελφία (*philadelphia*, brotherly love) expresses the familial character of Christian relationships, thus indicating that believers are bound *not by some kind of legal contract but by kinship*.[149] These koine Greek terms reveal that Christian moral theology understands community not as optional or instrumental (cf. libertarian ethic) but as essential to human flourishing.

Patristic writers of early Church history further reinforce this as evidenced by St. John Chrysostom who repeatedly emphasizes that believers are "co-members" (*συμμέλη*, *symmelē*) of one another and that the health of the body depends on the active care of each part.[150] In a similar

---

[144] Ephesians 4:2; see also Colossians 3:12-14.

[145] Ephesians 4:4-6.

[146] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14. This Pauline emphasis on unity resonates strongly with Augustine's claim in that true peace and the common good arise *only when a community is ordered by one love under one God*. For Augustine (as with the apostle Paul) the Church is not a voluntary association but a people formed into unity by the Spirit, whose shared identity transcends individual autonomy.

[147] Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3.

[148] 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1.

[149] Romans 12:10; Hebrews 13:1.

[150] Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*, Homily 30.

way St. Basil the Great insists that human beings are created for κοινωνικός (*koinōnikos*, "communion-oriented") life, and therefore isolation contradicts the very structure of human nature.[151] For the Patristic Fathers, the Church is a school of charity in which believers learn to embody ἀγάπη (*agapē*, self-giving love) through very real concrete acts of service, generosity, and mutual care.

David Hollenbach's account of the common good provides a crucial bridge between Christian theological anthropology and broader social ethics. In *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Hollenbach argues that human beings are fundamentally social, relational, and interdependent, and therefore the moral life cannot be reduced to the pursuit of private goods by autonomous individuals.[152] He insists that he common good is not a mere aggregation or cluster of individual preferences or interests but a shared moral reality (a good that can only be achieved together, through relationships of cooperation, solidarity, and mutual responsibility).[153] Hollenbach goes on to critique modern individualistic frameworks for treating society as a neutral arena for private pursuits, arguing instead that human flourishing is *inherently* participatory and requires the cultivation of social conditions that enable all persons to thrive.[154]

Therefore this theological anthropology continues by extending *beyond the Church* to shape Christian understanding of *society itself* so that human community is not viewed as a collection of self-contained agents but as a domain in which the virtues of δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosynē*, justice), εἰρήνη (*eirēnē*, peace), and οἰκονομία (*oikonomia*, stewardship ordered toward the good of the household/community) reflect the very character of God. Each of these virtues expresses a dimension of the common good that Hollenbach highlights in the following way: justice as the right-ordering of relationships, peace as the presence of harmony and wholeness, and stewardship as the responsible coordination of resources *for the well-being of all* (i.e., not just the Church, but society and humanity as a whole).[155]

In this framework, the common good is not simply the sum of individual pursuits but rather a shared moral undertaking that arises from the interdependence of persons. Hollenbach further emphasizes that human flourishing is actually impossible in isolation and that it requires the

---

[151] Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, Homily on Psalm 14.
[152] Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 6-10.
[153] Ibid., 81-85.
[154] Ibid., 10-14; 27-33.
[155] Ibid., 88-94; see also 104-110 on the relational nature of justice and peace.

structures of solidarity and unity, practices of mutual care, and a moral imagination shaped by the recognition that one's wellbeing is bound up with the wellbeing of others.[156] Thus, Christian moral theology insists that society itself must be ordered toward the flourishing of all, not merely the liberty of individuals, and so the common good is therefore both a moral prospect and a practical mandate. In sum, it calls communities to cultivate the conditions in which every person can participate in the goods that make life genuinely human.[157]

Therefore, Christian moral theology insists that community is not merely instrumental (valuable only insofar as it serves individual aims) but rather being vitally essential to human flourishing. To be human, in the Christian ethic, is to belong, to participate, and to live in relationships ordered toward the good of others. Autonomy is not rejected, but it is reoriented in a way that freedom is not freedom *from* obligation but freedom *for* love.[158]

N - Normative Evaluation and Summary of the Contrast

The claim that one is not responsible for another's welfare and that others have no right to one's labor reflects a coherent ethical system rooted in self-ownership, negative rights, and autonomy.[159] As has been previously discussed, within this framework the individual is the primary moral unit, moral obligations arise only when freely chosen, and duties are therefore understood as limits on interference rather than positive claims others may make upon one's time, resources, or concern. Therefore, since the self is viewed as sovereign over its own body, labor, and property,

---

[156] Ibid., 119-123; 127-130. To be clear on what Hollenbach is saying here, and to insert some additional commentary, a moral imagination is none other than one's inner capacity to see beyond what is immediately visible and to envision the world as it *ought to be* rather than merely as it is (i.e., prescription vs. description). It thus enables one to perceive the dignity of others, anticipate the consequences of actions, and imagine alternative possibilities for justice, mercy, and the common good. It is in this sense, that moral imagination moves a person from self-interest to shared responsibility, from what benefits "me" to what benefits "us", and from the present moment to the long-term flourishing of others. In short, it is the faculty that allows us to empathize, to foresee potential harm, to envision healing, and to pursue the good creatively and faithfully within the complexities of human life.

[157] When we speak of enabling every person to "participate in the goods that make life genuinely human," it refers to the shared moral, relational, and spiritual goods that allow human beings to flourish as creatures made in the *imago Dei*. These goods include justice, peace, stewardship, solidarity, friendship, truth, beauty, and above all *agape* (goods that cannot be hoarded or privatized but only realized in community). To be "genuinely human" is to live in a way that reflects our relational, moral, and spiritual nature: created for communion, ordered toward the good of others, and capable of love, responsibility, and mutual belonging. The connection, therefore, is intrinsic in this way: the goods that make life genuinely human are goods that can only be shared, and human beings become fully themselves only through participation in these shared goods. Therefore, in this sense, Christian ethics insists that human flourishing is never an isolated achievement but a communal reality, arising from the interdependence of persons and the social conditions that allow all to partake in the goods proper to human dignity.

[158] Galatians 5:13; John 13:34-35.

[159] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

it leads to the view that any expectation of *unchosen responsibility* is interpreted as a violation of personal liberty. This in turn produces a moral outlook in which the boundaries of the self are sharply drawn, and the needs or vulnerabilities of others do not produce inherent obligations. And while in a system such as this social cooperation is possible, it always remains contingent, being grounded in mutual advantage rather than in any deeper sense of shared identity or communal belonging. In other words, we are describing a moral framework in which cooperation happens *only when it benefits the individual, and obligations last only as long as they serve one's personal aims.* This is essentially the ethical logic behind "What's in it for me" and while it is not necessarily crude or selfish in the everyday sense, it nevertheless is structurally oriented toward self-interest as the basis for moral action.

However, this system stands in sharp contrast to the Christian moral tradition, which grounds human identity in divine ownership, affirms positive duties toward others, and frames moral life as a communal pursuit of the common good.[160] Christian moral theology calls believers to a life of generosity, service, and sacrificial love, shaped not by the minimization of obligation but by the imitation of Christ. Matthew 25:31-46 provides one of the most decisive biblical foundations for understanding Christian moral theology as a life shaped not by the minimization of obligation but by the imitation of Christ (e.g., through generosity, service, and sacrificial love). From a historical perspective, Jesus draws upon familiar Jewish apocalyptic imagery to depict the final judgment, although he radically reframes the criteria by which the nations are evaluated, so instead of things such as doctrinal precision, ritual observance, or political allegiance, the decisive measure instead is concrete acts of mercy toward "the least of these." In a first-century context where communal care was essential for survival, Jesus' teaching would have been heard as an intensification of interpersonal responsibility, and not a reduction of it.

Theologically, the passage hinges on Jesus' startling identification with the vulnerable as seen in his statement, "as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." The Greek grammar underscores this point where the aorist verbs *ἐποιήσατε* and *οὐκ ἐποιήσατε* emphasize actual deeds rather than intentions or sentiments, while the superlative *ἐλάχιστος* ("least, smallest") highlights that the moral claim arises precisely from the insignificance and vulnerability of the person in need. The phrase *ἐφ' ὅσον* ("insofar as") tightly links the action to Christ himself, making mercy toward others *an act of devotion to Christ*. Thus, Matthew 25

[160] Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*.

presents a moral picture in which love is not abstract but embodied, not optional but essential, and not reducible to non-interference but expressed through concrete acts of care.

The patristic tradition consistently interpreted this passage as a mandate for active, self-giving love. John Chrysostom, preaching in a society marked by stark economic inequality, repeatedly insisted that Christ is encountered in the poor. In his *Homilies on Matthew*, he warns that neglecting the needy is equivalent to neglecting Christ himself, arguing that one cannot claim to honor Christ at the altar while ignoring him in the hungry and destitute.[161] For Chrysostom, Matthew 25 leaves no room for a faith that remains inert or self-protective; *mercy is the very form of Christian worship.*

In similar fashion, St. Augustine reads this passage as a revelation of the inseparability of love for God and love for one's neighbor. In *City of God*, Augustine argues that rightly ordered love is the foundation of a just society,[162] and in his sermons he frequently identifies the works of mercy as the "sacrifices of the Christian,"[163] insisting that *faith becomes visible only through acts of charity.* For Augustine, the judgment scene in Matthew 25 exposes the truth that faith without embodied love is hollow, and that the neighbor's need becomes the "arena" in which love for God is tested and revealed.

Continuing this patristic thought in relation to the Matthaean passage, St. Basil the Great, who was writing in the midst of famine and social upheaval, offers some of the most forceful commentary on the ethical implications of this text. In *On Social Justice*, he argues that withholding resources from the needy is not merely a failure of generosity but a form of injustice when he writes that "the bread you keep belongs to the hungry; the cloak you store belongs to the naked."[164] Thus Basil reads Matthew 25 as a direct indictment of hoarding and a plea to understand property as entrusted for the sake of others. For Basil, the moral life is inherently communal, and the believer's resources (i.e., material, spiritual, and personal) are given by God for the building up of the whole community.

Together, these three early Fathers show a unified interpretation of Matthew 25 that it is not a call to minimal ethical compliance but a call to a life shaped by Christ's own self-giving love.

---

[161] John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), Homily 50.

[162] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14.

[163] Augustine, *Sermon 37*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990-), III/2: 157-59.

[164] Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*, 69.

The early Church understood this passage as a decisive rejection of any moral framework that confines responsibility to voluntary consent or reduces the neighbor to a boundary rather than a claim. Instead, Matthew 25 presents a picture in which the needs of others create *real moral obligations*,[165] not because they have earned them, but because Christ has chosen to identify himself with them.

In this way, Matthew 25:31-46 directly supports the claim that Christian moral theology calls believers to a life of generosity, service, and sacrificial love, one that is grounded not in autonomy but in communion, not in self-ownership but in divine ownership, and not in the avoidance of harm but in the active pursuit of the good of one's neighbor. The final judgment reveals what has always been true: those who belong to Christ resemble Christ, and Christ is the one who feeds, welcomes, heals, and visits. Thus, Christian moral responsibility is not an optional add-on to faith but the very shape of discipleship itself.

Table 4. The FOUNDATION Framework: Libertarian Ethics vs. Christian Moral Theology

Feature	**Libertarian / Rights-Based Ethics**	**Christian Moral Theology (with Scripture)**
F: Foundational Anthropology	Self-Ownership: The individual is self-owned; autonomy over body and labor is absolute.	God-Ownership: Humans bear the *imago Dei* but belong to God; we are stewards, not owners. (Gen 1:27; Ps 24:1; 1 Cor 6:19-20)
O: Orientation of the Will	Maximizing Liberty: The highest aim is personal freedom and the minimization of coercion.	Christlike Love: The highest aim is the cultivation of virtue and sacrificial love (*agapē*). (1 Cor 13:1-7; Rom 8:29; Col 3:12-14)
U: Understanding of Neighbor	Autonomous Peer: The neighbor is a rights-bearer with no claim on your labor without consent.	Object of Care: The neighbor is someone to whom one owes active, proactive love and concrete care. (Luke 10:25-37; Rom 13:8-10)
N: Nature of Duties	Negative Duties: Obligations are restricted to non-interference (do not harm or coerce).	Positive Obligations: Duties include active commands for love, mercy, and mutual care. (Matt 22:37-39; Gal 6:2; 1 John 3:17)

[165] To call these moral obligations "real" is to affirm that they arise from the very structure of human existence and are grounded in the nature of reality itself, therefore binding us not by preference or consent, but by who we are as relational creatures whose lives are inextricably linked to the lives of others.

D: Definition of Common Good	Aggregate Result: The sum of individuals freely pursuing their own private interests.	Shared Project: A communal effort grounded in justice, solidarity, and ordered loves. (Jer 29:7; Phil 2:3-4; Acts 2:44-45)
A: Aim of Labor and Property	Exclusive Ownership: Labor belongs solely to the individual; redistribution is viewed as theft.	Entrusted Stewardship: Resources are gifts from God used for service and the needy. (Deut 15:7-11; Eph 4:28; Prov 19:17)
T: Ties of Interdependence	Independence: Humans are fundamentally independent; ties arise only by voluntary consent.	One Body: Humans are fundamentally interdependent and responsible for one another. (1 Cor 12:12-26; Rom 12:4-5)
I: Interpersonal Responsibility	Contractual: Responsibility is strictly voluntary and limited to specific agreements.	Intrinsic: Responsibility is inherent to human identity and the call of discipleship. (James 2:14-17; Heb 13:16)
O: Orientation toward Community	Instrumental: Community is a tool for autonomous individuals to gain mutual advantage.	Essential: Community is vital for flourishing; members belong to one another. (Acts 4:32-35; Eph 4:1-6)
N: Normative Evaluation	Permissible Non-Involvement: Ignoring needs is acceptable if no harm was directly caused.	Culpable Neglect: Non-involvement in the face of suffering can be morally blameworthy. (Prov 3:27; Matt 25:31-46; James 4:17)

Critical Analysis of Representative Libertarian Arguments

As we analyze the contrast between rights-based libertarianism and Christian ethical frameworks, it becomes clearer that the next step is to examine how these divergent foundations actually shape concrete moral claims. Various abstract principles (e.g., self-ownership, autonomy, stewardship, divine command, etc.) inevitably manifest themselves in specific arguments about social responsibility, economic justice, and the obligations individuals bear toward one another. Nowhere is this more evident than in the recurring assertions that populate contemporary political discourse (e.g., claims about taxation, personal responsibility, freedom, the limits of moral duty, etc.) in which these arguments are not just rhetorical, but rather they reveal the very underlying anthropology and moral logic of the ethical systems from which they arise.

To highlight these differences more sharply, the following section analyzes five of the most common rights-based libertarian arguments through a structured lens in which each argument is

presented as a formal syllogism, followed by identifying its internal weaknesses (or fallacies), and then reframed through the perspective of theological ethics. Not only does this approach help to clarify the philosophical assumptions that are embedded within libertarian reasoning but it also demonstrates how theological ethics offers a more relational and theologically grounded account of human responsibility. Therefore, by moving from theoretical contrast to concrete moral claims, the analysis highlights the practical implications of each framework in order to help understand the common good, social obligation, and the moral shape of communal life.

1. "My taxes should not pay for other people's healthcare."

Syllogism

Premise 1: Individuals own themselves and their labor absolutely.[166]

Premise 2: Taking someone's resources without consent violates self-ownership.[167]

Premise 3: Taxation for social welfare redistributes resources without consent.[168]

Conclusion: Therefore, taxation for healthcare is morally illegitimate.

Fallacies / Weaknesses

• *Begging the Question:* The argument assumes self-ownership as an unquestionable moral axiom rather than defending it.

• *False Dichotomy:* It frames the choice as either coercive taxation or pure voluntarism, ignoring intermediate moral frameworks.

• *Oversimplification:* The argument treats healthcare as a purely private good, ignoring communal interdependence and public health realities.

Christian Ethical Reconciliation

Christian moral theology begins not with self-ownership but with divine ownership and stewardship.[169] Since both life and its resources are gifts entrusted by God, Christians bear positive obligations toward the sick and vulnerable.[170] Healthcare thus becomes an expression of love of

[166] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.
[167] Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*.
[168] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.
[169] Psalm 24:1; 1 Cor 6:19-20.
[170] Matt 22:37-39; Gal 6:2.

neighbor, not merely a financial transaction,[171] while the Christian framework reframes taxation not as theft but as one legitimate means of fulfilling communal responsibility.[172]

2. "I have no obligation to help others unless I consent to it."

Syllogism

Premise 1: Moral obligations arise only from voluntary agreements.[173]

Premise 2: I have not voluntarily agreed to assist others.

Conclusion: Therefore, I have no moral obligation to help others.

Fallacies / Weaknesses

• *Arbitrary Limitation:* The argument restricts moral duties to contractual obligations without justification.

• *Contradiction with Human Nature:* It also ignores the relational, interdependent nature of human life.[174]

• *Moral Minimalism:* The argument also reduces ethics to non-harm, excluding positive duties widely recognized across traditions.

Christian Ethical Reconciliation

Christian moral theology holds forth that love of one's neighbor is a divine command and not a voluntary contract,[175] and obligations arise from shared humanity, the *imago Dei*,[176] and the call to bear one another's burdens.[177] Therefore, the moral responsibility is intrinsic and not optional. The Good Samaritan narrative directly contradicts the libertarian premise by portraying non-involvement as morally blameworthy.[178]

3. "Redistribution is theft because it takes what I earned."

Syllogism

Premise 1: Individuals have absolute ownership over what they produce.[179]

---

[171] Luke 10:25-37.
[172] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14.
[173] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.95-99.
[174] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.
[175] Matt 22:37-39.
[176] Gen 1:27.
[177] Gal 6:2.
[178] Luke 10:25-37.
[179] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.27-51.

Premise 2: Redistribution takes resources from individuals without their consent.
Conclusion: Therefore, redistribution is theft.

Fallacies / Weaknesses

• *Questionable Premise:* The argument assumes labor creates absolute ownership, ignoring social, historical, and communal contributions.[180]
• *Category Error:* It equates legal taxation with criminal theft, conflating distinct moral categories.
• *Ignoring Externalities:* The argument also overlooks how individual wealth depends on social infrastructure (roads, courts, education, etc.).[181]

Christian Ethical Reconciliation

Christian theology views property as stewardship as opposed to absolute possession,[182] and wealth is entrusted for the sake of others, especially the poor.[183] Redistribution (whether voluntary or structured through just governance) can be a legitimate expression of justice, solidarity, and care for the vulnerable.[184] The Christian tradition consistently critiques hoarding and elevates generosity as a moral duty.[185]

4. "People should be free to do whatever they want as long as they don't harm others."

Syllogism

Premise 1: The only morally relevant boundary is non-harm.[186]
Premise 2: Actions that do not directly harm others are morally permissible.
Conclusion: Therefore, individuals should be free to act however they wish if no harm is caused.

Fallacies / Weaknesses

• *Reductionism:* This reduces morality to harm avoidance, ignoring virtue, formation, and communal well-being.[187]
• *Ambiguity:* "Harm" is undefined and often interpreted narrowly (e.g., excluding neglect or

---

[180] Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 66.
[183] Deut 15:7-11.
[184] Basil the Great, *On Social Justice*.
[185] Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*.
[186] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.
[187] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

systemic injustice).

• *Neglect of Indirect Effects:* The argument ignores how private actions can have communal consequences.

Christian Ethical Reconciliation

Christian moral theology is not oriented toward freedom *from obligation but freedom for love and virtue*.[188] Thus the moral life is not defined by minimal harm but rather by positive formation, holiness, and service.[189] Therefore, Christian moral theology recognizes that actions shape communities and souls, not just immediate outcome, and that the standard is Christlike love, and not mere non-interference.[190]

5. "Individuals are responsible only for themselves, not for society."

Syllogism

Premise 1: Individuals are fundamentally independent moral agents.[191]

Premise 2: Independence implies self-responsibility and no inherent obligations to others.

Conclusion: Therefore, individuals are responsible only for themselves.

Fallacies / Weaknesses

• *False Anthropology:* The argument misrepresents human beings as isolated rather than relational.[192]

• *Ignoring Dependency:* It overlooks childhood, disability, aging, and the universal need for care.

• *Circular Reasoning:* It assumes independence in order to prove independence.

Christian Ethical Reconciliation

Christian anthropology actually begins with interdependence (e.g., the Body of Christ, shared burdens, mutual care, etc.),[193] and thus responsibility is communal and not merely individual. Scripture repeatedly condemns neglect of the vulnerable[194] and elevates solidarity as a core moral

---

[188] 1 Cor 13:1-7.
[189] Col 3:12-14.
[190] Rom 8:29.
[191] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.
[192] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14.
[193] 1 Cor 12:12-26; Rom 12:4-5.
[194] Prov 3:27; James 2:14-17.

principle.[195] In sum, Christian moral theology understands society not as a collection of isolated agents but as a community ordered toward the common good.[196]

The Structural Collapse of Radical Individualism and Radical Collectivism

A rights-based libertarian ethic ultimately violates the principle of non-contradiction because it simultaneously asserts two mutually incompatible claims. The first being that individuals possess no inherent, non-consensual obligations to others, and second, that all individuals are nevertheless morally bound to respect the absolute rights of others.[197] The universal obligation to refrain from violating another's autonomy is itself an unchosen duty, and one that the rights-based libertarian framework cannot account for *without abandoning its foundational premise that all moral obligations arise solely from voluntary consent*.[198] Therefore, when one denies the existence of inherent duties while at the same time depending on at least one such duty for its own coherence, it results in the libertarian ethic collapsing into contradiction, as evidenced by affirming and denying unchosen moral obligations at the same time.[199] At the same time, extreme collectivism does no better, for it also is guilty of violating the principle of non-contradiction when it asserts that individuals possess no intrinsic moral claims against the community while at the same time demanding unconditional loyalty, sacrifice, and compliance from those very same individuals.[200] In collectivist systems, the individual is declared morally *subordinate to the whole*, yet the whole is treated as possessing binding authority over individuals, and this is an authority that cannot exist unless individuals retain the very moral status the system in turn denies them.[201] Thus, extreme collectivism negates the moral agency of persons while presupposing that agency to justify compulsory obligations, resulting in a structural incoherence parallel to that of libertarianism.[202] Therefore, both extremes (radical individualism and radical collectivism) attempt to ground moral obligation in frameworks that in turn erase the very

---

[195] Acts 4:32-35.

[196] Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*.

[197] Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 65-72.

[198] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 28-33.

[199] Charles Taylor, "Atomism," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 187-210.

[200] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 94-102.

[201] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 40-45.

[202] Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 112-18.

conditions that make obligation intelligible.[203] More specifically, the rights-based libertarian ethic is self-defeating because the social conditions required for individuals to exercise meaningful autonomy (e.g., legal order, shared institutions, mutual trust, cooperative infrastructure, etc.) cannot be generated or sustained by a moral system that recognizes *only* negative duties and voluntary contracts.[204] Therefore, by rejecting inherent responsibilities for the welfare of others, a rights-based libertarianism actually undermines the communal goods that make individual liberty even possible in the first place[205] for if no one bears positive obligations to support the vulnerable, maintain shared structures, or contribute to the overall common good, the social environment in turn deteriorates to the point where autonomy becomes insecure or practically meaningless.[206/207] Extreme collectivism is likewise just as self-defeating for by dissolving individual autonomy into the collective, it in turn destroys the moral accountability, personal initiative, and distinguished roles necessary for a functioning social body.[208] In other words, a society that denies individual moral autonomy cannot sustain the trust, responsibility, or creativity required for collective flourishing.[209/210] Therefore in the end, any attempt at maximizing either individual liberty or

---

[203] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 33-35. MacIntyre argues that both radical individualism and radical collectivism undermine the very basis for meaningful moral obligation. Radical individualism insists that all duties are voluntary, denying any inherent responsibilities to others, yet it paradoxically relies on unchosen duties (like respecting others' autonomy) to function. Radical collectivism subordinates the individual entirely to the group, erasing personal agency and thus the capacity for genuine moral responsibility. In both cases, these extremes attempt to ground moral obligation in ways that actually destroy the social and relational context (e.g., shared practices, virtues, and communities) that make obligation intelligible and binding in the first place.

[204] Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 26-31.

[205] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 88-92.

[206] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 54-59.

[207] As an example, imagine a society where everyone adopts a strict rights-based libertarian stance in that individuals only help others *if* they voluntarily choose to, and there are no inherent obligations to support public goods like healthcare, roads, or emergency services. In this scenario, no one feels responsible for funding or maintaining hospitals, vaccination programs, or clean water systems unless they *personally benefit or explicitly consent*. Over time, we would have a society in which public health deteriorates, diseases spread, accidents go untreated, and basic infrastructure crumbles. As a result, even those who value their autonomy find their freedom actually becomes diminished (e.g., they cannot safely travel, work, pursue their goals because the social environment has become unstable and unsafe, etc.). Therefore, by refusing to support the vulnerable or contribute to shared structures or the common good, the very conditions that make individual liberty meaningful (e.g., safety, health, trust) begin to erode, making autonomy insecure and/or practically meaningless.

[208] Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," in *Open Letters* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 125-30.

[209] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 15-20.

[210] As an example, consider a society where the government or the collective dictates every aspect of life (e.g., career choices, creative expression, personal beliefs, etc.) thus requiring strict conformity while suppressing dissent. In such a system, individuals are not encouraged or in some cases not even permitted to take personal initiative, innovate, or question the status quo. To further illustrate the point, picture how in some historical totalitarian regimes,

collective unity in the framework or ethical philosophy of both rights-based libertarianism and extreme collectivism erodes the very foundations upon which their respective ideals ultimately depend.[211]

Why the Christian Ethic Does Not Violate the Principle of Non-Contradiction

On the other hand, Christian moral theology does not violate the principle of non-contradiction since its claims about human identity, obligation, and moral responsibility all flow coherently from a single foundational premise in that human beings belong to God and bear the *imago Dei*.[212] From this theological anthropology, the existence of both negative and positive duties follows naturally and without internal tension. If God is the creator and rightful Lord of human life, then divine commands (e.g., including the obligation to love one's neighbor) are in fact not arbitrary impositions but expressions of the moral order grounded in God's nature.[213] Therefore, Christian moral theology does not deny unchosen obligations while simultaneously

---

artists, scientists, and workers were forced to serve the collective's goals, with little room for personal vision or responsibility. As a result, people became passive, fearful of standing out, and reluctant to take responsibility for mistakes or even propose new ideas. Over a period of time, this stifling of individual autonomy led to a breakdown in trust, lack of creativity, and a decline in social and economic vitality. The society struggled to adapt or flourish because the very qualities needed for collective success (e.g., moral accountability, initiative, and diverse talents) had been suppressed.

[211] Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1947), 48-52.

[212] Gen 1:27; Ps 24:1; 1 Cor 6:19-20. Anthropologically, this means that every person's identity is fundamentally relational and derived from being created in God's image, not from autonomous self-ownership. Theologically, because God is the creator and rightful Lord of all, human beings are stewards rather than absolute owners of their lives, gifts, and resources. From this foundation, both negative duties (not to harm) and positive obligations (to love, serve, and care for others) arise naturally and coherently, without internal contradiction. Therefore, moral responsibility is not an arbitrary imposition or a matter of voluntary contract, but rather it is an intrinsic dimension of what it means to be human (rooted in our relationship to God and to one another) In sum, this unified foundation ensures that Christian moral theology maintains internal coherence, affirming that all moral duties are grounded in the same theological and anthropological reality.

[213] Col 3:12-14; Rom 12:4-5. Anthropologically, Paul is redefining human identity as fundamentally relational rather than individualistic. In Colossians 3:12-14, he describes believers as "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved," emphasizing that their core identity is received from God and rooted in belonging to a new community. The virtues Paul commands (i.e., compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and above all love) are inherently relational and meant to be practiced within the context of communal life. In Romans 12:4-5, Paul uses the metaphor of the body to illustrate that individuals are not isolated agents but "members one of another," each with distinct roles but united in purpose and identity. This means that selfhood is constituted through belonging and participation in a larger whole, not through autonomy or self-sufficiency. From a theological perspective, Paul grounds moral responsibility and ethical life in the reality that believers are united with Christ and with one another. The call to "put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:14) and to recognize that "we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom 12:5) means that Christian ethics flows from a shared identity in Christ. Therefore, moral duties are not arbitrary rules or voluntary contracts but expressions of a new ontological reality, that is, being renewed in the image of Christ and participating in God's own life. Thus, the Christian moral life is communal, shaped by virtues that sustain unity, mutual care, and the common good, and reflecting the character of God and the interconnectedness of all believers.

depending on them but rather it openly affirms that moral duties arise from humanity's relationship to God and to one another.[214] Therefore, since its anthropology, moral claims, and social obligations all emerge from the same theological foundation, the Christian ethic maintains internal coherence and avoids the contradictions inherent in autonomy-centered systems.[215]

Why the Christian Ethic Is Not Self-Defeating

Christian moral theology is also not self-defeating because the obligations it affirms actively sustain the very conditions necessary for human flourishing, communal life, and moral agency. For example, positive duties (e.g., care for the vulnerable, generosity toward the poor, participation in the common good) strengthen the bonds of trust, justice, and mutual support that make meaningful freedom possible.[216] Therefore, by grounding moral responsibility in love, solidarity, and stewardship, Christian theology provides the social and relational framework that allows individuals and communities to thrive,[217] and instead of eroding the foundations of moral life, Christian moral theology actually reinforces them by cultivating virtues that sustain social order and human dignity.[218] Thus, because its moral obligations build up the very goods they

---

[214] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX.14; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 90. Both Augustine and Aquinas stress the foundational principle of Christian moral theology that moral duties arise from humanity's relationship to God and to one another, not merely from voluntary consent or social contract. This means Christian ethics openly affirms unchosen obligations (e.g., love, justice, care for the vulnerable) because they are rooted in the nature of the human person as created in the image of God, belonging to God, and embedded in a relational community. Unlike other frameworks that depend on unchosen duties while denying them, Christian moral theology maintains coherence by grounding all moral responsibility in this unified theological and anthropological foundation (as previously noted).

[215] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*. Both Hauerwas and Wolterstorff emphasize that Christian moral theology is grounded in a unified vision of the human person as created for relationship with God and others, and that moral duties flow naturally from this identity. This coherence stands in contrast to autonomy-centered systems, which often depend on unchosen obligations while denying them as we have previously noted. Their works affirm that Christian ethics is internally consistent because its anthropology, obligations, and social vision are all rooted in the foundational premise of belonging to God and bearing the *imago Dei*, thus avoiding the contradictions found in frameworks that separate moral duty from relational identity.

[216] Gal 6:2; Prov 3:27; Matt 25:31-46. In ancient Israelite society, Proverbs 3:27 -"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act" reflects a communal ethic where justice, generosity, and care for the vulnerable were considered essential obligations, not optional acts of charity. Historically, this wisdom tradition assumed that social and economic responsibilities (such as supporting the poor and fulfilling one's duties to neighbors) were foundational for maintaining covenantal life and social stability. Anthropologically, the verse presupposes that individuals are embedded in networks of mutual obligation, with moral responsibility extending beyond voluntary contracts to inherent duties toward others. This stands in contrast to radical individualism, which treats such obligations as contingent on personal choice. Proverbs 3:27 supports the argument that positive obligations are intrinsic to a functioning moral community, and that refusing to act for others' welfare undermines both social cohesion and the very conditions necessary for individual flourishing.

[217] Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*.

[218] Col 3:12-14; Rom 12:4-5.

presuppose, the Christian ethic avoids the self-undermining dynamic that is present in rights-based libertarianism and instead offers a coherent, life-giving account of human responsibility.[219]

Table 5. Libertarian Arguments vs. Christian Moral Theological/Ethical Reconciliations

Argument	Core Syllogism (Summary)	Fallacies & Weaknesses	Christian Theological/Ethical Reconciliation
Healthcare Taxation	P1: Self-ownership is absolute. P2: Taxation is non-consensual. C: Healthcare taxes are illegitimate.	Begging the Question: Assumes self-ownership as an axiom. False Dichotomy: Ignores intermediate frameworks.	Replaces self-ownership with divine stewardship. Healthcare is an expression of neighborly love and communal responsibility.
Consensual Obligation	P1: Duties arise only from contracts. P2: I have not consented. C: I have no duty to help.	Moral Minimalism: Reduces ethics to contracts. False Nature: Ignores human interdependence.	Love of neighbor is a divine command, not a contract. Responsibility is intrinsic to the *imago Dei* and shared humanity.
Redistribution as Theft	P1: Labor creates absolute ownership. P2: Taking is theft. C: Redistribution is theft.	Category Error: Equates taxation with crime. Ignoring Externalities: Ignores social infrastructure.	Property is stewardship, not absolute possession. Wealth is entrusted for the common good and care of the vulnerable.
Harm Principle	P1: Only non-harm is relevant. P2: No harm = permissible.	Reductionism: Ignores virtue and formation. Ambiguity: Narrowly defines "harm," ignoring neglect.	Standard is Christlike love, not non-interference. Freedom is for the sake of service and positive communal impact.

[219] Acts 2:44-45; Eph 4:1-6. In Acts 2:44-45, the early Christian community is described as sharing possessions and resources so that no one was in need, embodying a model where mutual care and generosity actively sustain communal well-being. Ephesians 4:1-6 calls believers to unity, humility, patience, and love, emphasizing that the Church is “one body” bound together by shared virtues and responsibilities. Historically, these passages illustrate that Christian ethics does not just prescribe individual liberty or voluntary charity, but cultivates the social trust, solidarity, and practical support necessary for both individual and collective flourishing. Thus by making positive obligations (e.g., caring for the vulnerable, maintaining unity) that would be central to its moral vision, Christianity ensures that the goods of community, trust, and freedom are continually reinforced, rather than eroded. This stands in contrast to rights-based libertarianism, which, by rejecting inherent responsibilities, risks undermining the very social conditions that make liberty meaningful.

	C: Absolute freedom if no harm.		
Individual Responsibility	P1: Humans are isolated agents. P2: Agents owe only self-care. C: No social responsibility.	False Anthropology: Views humans as isolated. Circular Reasoning: Assumes independence to prove it.	Anthropology is relational (Body of Christ). Solidarity is a core principle; scripture mandates care for the vulnerable.

Narrative Comparison of Libertarian and Theological Ethical Frameworks

A comparison between libertarian, rights-based ethics and theological ethics reveals two fundamentally different visions of the human person and the moral life. Libertarian ethics begins with the premise of self-ownership, asserting that individuals possess absolute autonomy over their bodies, labor, and resources.[220] From this foundation, moral duties are understood almost exclusively as negative obligations such as the duty not to harm, coerce, or interfere with others.[221] However, because obligations arise only through voluntary consent, the neighbor has no inherent claim upon one's labor or welfare,[222] and the common good, in this framework, is simply the cumulative result of individuals freely pursuing their own interests, while at the same time, non-involvement in another's suffering is morally permissible so long as one does not cause harm.[223]

In contrast, theological ethics offers a sharply different vision that begins not with self-ownership but with divine ownership, affirming that every human being is created in the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27) and belongs to God (Ps 24:1; 1 Cor 6:19-20).[224] In turn, this theological anthropology grounds a moral life that is inherently relational and communal in which duties toward others are not just optional acts of generosity but are rather positive obligations rooted in love of one's neighbor (Matt 22:37-39), the call to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), and the expectation that believers will not close their hearts to those in need (1 John 3:17).[225] The neighbor,

[220] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.
[221] Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*.
[222] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*.
[223] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*.
[224] Genesis 1:27; Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.
[225] Matthew 22:37-39; Galatians 6:2; 1 John 3:17.

therefore, is not simply a rights-bearing individual but rather someone to whom one owes active love, as exemplified in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).[226]

This difference also extends to the understanding of labor and property in which rights-based libertarian ethics treats labor as exclusively one's own and views redistribution as coercive.[227] However, theological ethics frames labor and resources as gifts entrusted by God for the sake of others. For example, Sacred Scripture repeatedly calls for generosity toward the poor (Deut 15:7-11), urges believers to work so that they may "have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph 4:28), and teaches that kindness to the poor is an act of honor toward God (Prov 19:17).[228/229] Therefore the common good is not a by-product of individual pursuits but a shared

---

[226] Luke 10:25-37. Anthropologically, this passage redefines the concept of "neighbor" by extending moral responsibility beyond kinship, ethnicity, or chosen associations, grounding it instead in shared human vulnerability and relational identity i.e., anyone whose need intersects with one's life becomes a neighbor deserving of care). Jesus' teaching makes compassion and active intervention essential expressions of what it means to be human, not optional or selective concerns. Sociologically, the parable challenges prevailing social norms that limit responsibility to one's "in-group", calling instead for a community structured by positive obligations of mercy, solidarity, and mutual care. Therefore by emphasizing concrete acts of care and the breaking down of social boundaries, the parable illustrates that genuine community is built not on voluntary association alone, but on the recognition of inherent duties that sustain trust, cohesion, and the common good.

[227] Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

[228] Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Ephesians 4:28; Proverbs 19:17. Deuteronomy 15:7-11 commanded ancient Israel to practice open-handed generosity toward the poor, making care for the vulnerable a central moral and religious duty. This generosity was not optional but was deeply rooted in the Israelites' covenant relationship with God, who had liberated and provided for them. The law required that all Israelites, regardless of town or tribe, give freely and without reluctance, especially as the year of debt release approached. Such institutionalized care (seen also in gleaning laws and tithes) ensured that poverty was addressed collectively, not left to private charity alone. The benefits of this system were profound in that for individuals, it cultivated virtues like compassion, humility, and trust in God, while promising spiritual blessing and encouraging a sense of stewardship rather than ownership. For the community, generosity fostered social cohesion, reduced resentment and prevented extreme poverty, which in turn creating a more stable and just society. Therefore, by embedding generosity into its laws, ancient Israel reflected divine justice and mercy, building a culture where the well-being of each person was seen as a shared responsibility, and the flourishing of the whole community was actively pursued.

[229] Regarding Deut 15:7-11, is it is a contradiction that the law required all Israelites to give "freely and without reluctance," since this seems to combine the freedom to choose with a legal compulsion. This is a classic question in biblical ethics and philosophy. The command to give "freely" in the Deuteronomy passage does not mean that giving is left to personal discretion or whim, but rather, it describes the *spirit* or *attitude* with which the required act is to be performed. The law makes generosity toward the poor a binding obligation (i.e., no Israelite could refuse to help the needy without violating God's command), however, the law also insists that this act should not be done grudgingly or with resentment, but with an open heart and genuine willingness. In other words, the law aims to shape both external behavior (ensuring the poor are cared for) and internal disposition (cultivating compassion and joy in giving). Therefore, this is not a logical contradiction, but a moral and spiritual ideal in which the law compels the act but calls for the heart to align with the act. The expectation is that over time obedience to the law would form the character of the people, so that what begins as duty actually becomes genuine virtue. This approach is echoed in later Jewish and Christian thought, where the highest form of obedience is not mere compliance, but a willing and joyful participation in God's justice and mercy.

moral endeavor that is grounded in justice, charity, and mutual concern for others (Jer 29:7; Phil 2:3-4; Acts 2:44-45).[230]

The two frameworks also differ in their understanding of community and moral formation with libertarian ethics viewing human beings as fundamentally independent, with obligations arising only through consent,[231] and theological ethics viewing human beings as members of one body (1 Cor 12:12-26; Rom 12:4-5), responsible for one another's well-being and called to active participation in the life of the community (Acts 4:32-35; Eph 4:1-6)[232] (non-involvement in the face of suffering is not morally neutral but potentially blameworthy (Prov 3:27; Matt 25:31-46; James 4:17).[233] In sum, libertarian ethics seeks to maximize personal liberty whereas theological ethics seeks to cultivate Christlike love, virtue, and communal responsibility, and therefore ultimately offering a richer, more comprehensive vision of human dignity and the moral life.[234]

From Structural Contrast to Normative Evaluation

While the FOUNDATION framework clarifies the structural and anthropological differences between a rights-based libertarian ethics and Christian moral theology, these differences become even more distinct when these systems are evaluated in terms of their practical adequacy. For example, it is one thing to map their conflicting assumptions, yet it is another to assess whether those assumptions can realistically sustain a coherent and morally compelling view of human life. Therefore, to move from description to evaluation, the next step is to examine how each framework performs when confronted with the real demands of moral responsibility, social obligation, and human flourishing. When viewed through Christian theological commitments and

---

[230] Jeremiah 29:7; Philippians 2:3-4; Acts 2:44-45. Later Jewish and Christian thought both address the tension between compelled generosity and giving freely by emphasizing that the law's requirement to give is meant to shape the heart, not just external actions. In Judaism, rabbinic teachings such as Maimonides' "Eight Levels of Charity" highlight that while charity is a legal obligation, the highest form is giving with joy and initiative, transforming duty into virtue. Similarly, in Christianity, the Apostle Paul teaches that "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7), and Church Fathers like St. Basil the Great and St. John Chrysostom stress that true fulfillment of the command to care for the poor comes when generosity flows from love and willingness, not mere compliance. Both traditions see the law *as a starting point, with the ideal being voluntary, heartfelt generosity that reflects God's own compassion.*

[231] Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.95-99.

[232] Acts 4:32-35; Ephesians 4:1-6.

[233] Proverbs 3:27; Matthew 25:31-46; James 4:17.

[234] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

further tested against humanistic and utilitarian[235]/[236] standards, the limitations of the libertarian ethic become increasingly evident. Therefore, what initially appears to be a principled defense of autonomy in turn actually reveals itself (under closer scrutiny) to be a morally insufficient account of the human person and the common good.[237]

The Limitations and Failures of the Libertarian Ethical Framework

While libertarian, rights-based ethics presents itself as a coherent and principled defense of individual autonomy, its underlying assumptions ultimately fail to provide an adequate account of human moral responsibility, social obligation, or the nature of the common good. Hence, this

[235] Christian moral theology aligns far more closely with soft utilitarianism than with its hard counterpart, not because Christianity is utilitarian, but because soft utilitarianism incorporates the very moral constraints, intrinsic dignity, and non-negotiable duties that hard utilitarianism rejects. Hard utilitarianism's insistence that the right action is always the one that maximizes total utility (regardless of whether it violates rights, justice, or the dignity of the person) thus stands in direct conflict with Christian ethics, which holds that some acts are intrinsically evil, that persons possess inviolable worth as bearers of the *imago Dei*, and that the means to an end must themselves be morally good. In contrast, soft utilitarianism, tempers consequential reasoning with moral boundaries, by acknowledging that certain actions are off-limits even if they increase overall welfare, and that the good of the community cannot override the dignity of the individual. This moderated consequentialism mirrors the Christian use of prudential judgment, which weighs consequences, balances goods, and seeks the flourishing of one's neighbor within the limits of moral law. In this way Christian theology is teleological rather than maximizing, for it evaluates actions by whether they move persons toward their proper end (i.e., union with God and the flourishing of others) rather than by a single metric of aggregate utility. Soft utilitarianism's openness to multiple goods, proportional reasoning, and the moral weight of relationships resonates with this Christian vision, whereas hard utilitarianism's reduction of all moral value to utility collapses the richness of human moral life into a single, impoverished calculus. In addition, Christian ethics requires *both the dignity of the individual and the common good*, in which a balance soft utilitarianism can accommodate but hard utilitarianism cannot. For example, Christian love (agape), while not utilitarian, is deeply concerned with outcomes (e.g., seeking the good of the other, avoiding harm, promoting human flourishing, etc.) yet it is always within the boundaries of moral law and the inherent worth of persons. Therefore, Christian moral theology aligns more naturally with soft utilitarianism's *bounded consequentialism* as opposed to the uncompromising, "the ends-justify-the-means" logic of the hard form.

[236] "Hard" utilitarianism, as an ethical theory and system, ultimately collapses under its own logic because it cannot consistently uphold its central claim (i.e., that moral rightness is determined solely by producing the greatest good for the greatest number) without contradicting itself. The theory insists that *consequences alone define morality*, yet it at the same time it requires individuals to act in ways that may undermine those very consequences if universally practiced. In other words, utilitarianism demands that people follow a rule only when it maximizes happiness, but if everyone followed that same rule in every case, it could easily produce less happiness overall. For example, a hard utilitarian may justify lying to spare someone's feelings because it produces more happiness in that moment, but if everyone lied whenever it seemed useful, trust would erode and overall happiness would decline. Thus the same act is "right" in the individual case but "wrong" when universally practiced and produces a direct contradiction that shows why hard utilitarianism ultimately defeats itself. Therefore, this creates a direct violation of the principle of non-contradiction in that the same action cannot be both morally required and morally forbidden under identical conditions. In the end, hard utilitarianism cannot provide a stable, non-contradictory basis for moral obligation and because its success depends on people *not* consistently applying its own standard it thus becomes a self-defeating ethical system. One final example would be that a utilitarian may cheat on a test because it produces more happiness for them in that moment, but if everyone cheated, grades would become meaningless and overall happiness would collapse, once again showing that utilitarianism only "works" if people *do not* consistently follow its own rule (and therefore it defeats itself).

[237] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

failure becomes evident not only when examined through the lens of theological ethics but also when evaluated from a humanistic and utilitarian perspectives. Each of these traditions (although distinct in method and grounding) reveals that libertarian ethics is too thin, too individualistic, and too morally minimal to sustain the demands of real human life.[238]

From a Christian ethical standpoint, libertarianism weakens even more at the level of anthropology in the sense that by grounding the moral life in self-ownership and negative duties, it denies the relational nature of the human person and the positive obligations that flow from divine ownership and the *imago Dei*. Sacred Scripture consistently frames moral responsibility as active, not just passive, showing that believers are commanded to love their neighbors (Matt 22:37-39), bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), and refuse to "close their hearts" to those in need (1 John 3:17), and the Good Samaritan narrative (Luke 10:25–37) illustrates that moral responsibility extends beyond non-interference to concrete acts of mercy (as previously noted).[239] In contrast, libertarian ethics reduces moral life to non-coercion and voluntary generosity, thus falling short of the Christian vision of stewardship, interdependence, and sacrificial love,[240] and it cannot account for the theological truth that human beings belong to God and to one another, and nor can it sustain the communal obligations that Christian discipleship requires.[241]

Even with this being said, the limitations of libertarian ethics are not confined to a Christian theological critique only. Shown from a humanistic perspective, libertarianism also fails because it misunderstands the nature of human flourishing. Humanistic ethics (whether classical, Renaissance, or modern) has long emphasized the social, relational, and cooperative dimensions of human life, in that human beings do not thrive in isolation, but rather they flourish in community, through mutual support, shared responsibility, and the cultivation of virtues that bind individuals together.[242] Any moral system that denies inherent responsibility for others cannot sustain the empathy, solidarity, or civic virtue that humanistic ethics regards as essential to a healthy society. Therefore, by reducing moral obligation to voluntary choice, libertarianism undermines the very

---

[238] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

[239] Matthew 22:37-39; Galatians 6:2; 1 John 3:17; Luke 10:25-37.

[240] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

[241] Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[242] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

conditions that make human flourishing possible. It attempts to offer freedom, but not formation; autonomy, but not belonging; rights, but not the moral bonds that make life meaningful.[243]

A similar critique emerges from a utilitarian standpoint, which evaluates moral systems by their capacity to promote overall well-being. Libertarian ethics, with its strict emphasis on individual autonomy, cannot reliably produce the greatest good for the greatest number simply because it denies inherent obligations to assist others and leaves the vulnerable dependent on voluntary charity rather than ensuring that their basic needs are met. In practice, this leads to predictable social harms such as preventable suffering, inequitable distribution of resources, and the erosion of social trust. Utilitarianism recognizes that human welfare is *interdependent* and that maximizing well-being often requires coordinated action, shared responsibility, and sometimes even collective sacrifice. On the other hand, libertarian ethics, by refusing to acknowledge these realities, proves incapable of generating the social outcomes that utilitarian reasoning actually demands. In other words, it protects liberty at the expense of well-being, and in doing so, fails its own test of moral adequacy.[244]

In summary, these critiques demonstrate that rights-based libertarian ethics is insufficient as a comprehensive moral framework for it cannot sustain the *Christian* vision of love and stewardship, the *humanistic* vision of communal flourishing, or the *utilitarian* vision of maximizing well-being. The libertarian commitment to autonomy (while it may be valuable in limited contexts)[245] becomes a liability when elevated to the highest moral principle. Human beings are not simply isolated pieces of matter, atoms bound together, but rather relational

---

[243] Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2009). Singer's ethical framework strongly reinforces this critique of libertarianism, because he argues that moral responsibility for others is inherent rather than optional, grounded in the simple fact that human beings can prevent suffering at relatively low cost to themselves. Singer explicitly rejects the idea that moral obligation depends on voluntary choice, insisting instead that the needs of others impose real, binding claims upon us regardless of consent. He also frames human flourishing in relational and communal terms, maintaining that empathy, solidarity, and shared responsibility are essential features of a healthy moral life. In sum, Singer's arguments directly support the claim that any moral system denying inherent responsibility for others (such as rights-based libertarianism) cannot sustain the very conditions that make human flourishing possible.

[244] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863).

[245] The libertarian commitment to autonomy (while it may be valuable in limited contexts) can be seen in debates about mandatory seatbelt laws. A libertarian might argue that adults should be free to decide whether or not to wear a seatbelt because the decision primarily affects their own body and therefore falls under the domain of personal autonomy. In a narrow sense, the emphasis on autonomy protects individuals from unnecessary state interference. However, this same commitment becomes problematic when extended to situations where one's choices *do* affect others such as refusing to help a neighbor in immediate danger, declining to contribute to public health measures, or rejecting any responsibility for the vulnerable. In these broader contexts, the libertarian elevation of autonomy fails to account for the relational and communal dimensions of moral life.

creatures whose lives are intertwined.[246] Therefore, any ethical system that denies this reality (whether intentionally or by omission) will ultimately fail to account for the depth, complexity, and moral demands of human life. Thus, it is theological ethics, by contrast, that offers a richer and more coherent vision, and one that affirms both the dignity of the individual and also the responsibilities of community, which culminates in the grounding moral life not in the minimization of obligation but in the fullness of love.[247]

Table 6. Multi-Tradition Critique of Libertarian Ethics

Category	Libertarian Ethics Claim	Ethical Critique (Christian, Humanistic, Utilitarian)
1. Overall Assessment	A principled defense of individual autonomy and self-ownership.	Cross-Tradition Finding: Too thin and morally minimal to account for social obligation or the common good.[248]
2. Christian: Anthropology	Grounds moral life in self-ownership and negative duties.	Humans are relational, created in the *imago Dei*, and accountable to God and neighbor.
3. Christian: Responsibility	Limits obligation to non-interference and voluntary generosity.	Commands active love, mercy, and burden-bearing (Matt 22:37-39; Gal 6:2).

[246] The experience of grief vividly demonstrates that human beings are not isolated pieces of matter but relational creatures whose lives are deeply intertwined with others. When a person loses a loved one, the pain they feel is not reducible to neurons firing or atoms shifting within the body, but rather, its depth arises because human identity is bound up with family, friends, mentors, communities and the like. In other words, the loss of another wounds us precisely because our lives are interwoven with theirs, and their absence tears at the relational fabric that helped constitute who we are. Therefore, grief reveals that human identity is fundamentally relational, not solitary, and it makes sense only if our well-being depends on meaningful bonds rather than autonomous self-containment. If we were just "atoms bound together," the death of another would not strike us so profoundly, but instead, the universality and intensity of grief expose the inadequacy of viewing persons as self-contained units and aligns closely with Christian anthropology, which holds that human beings are created for communion (koinōnia) rather than self-sovereignty.

[247] Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*.

[248] What we are saying is that when viewed through Christian, humanistic, and utilitarian ethical lenses, the libertarian framework is judged to be *too thin,* that is, it offers an overly minimal account of moral responsibility. Because it restricts obligation almost entirely to non-interference and voluntary consent, it cannot adequately explain why individuals should care for others, contribute to shared goods, or participate in the moral life of a community. Therefore, across these diverse ethical traditions, the shared conclusion is that libertarian ethics lacks the moral depth necessary to sustain genuine social obligation or a robust vision of the common good.

4. Christian: Communal Life	Cannot support stewardship, interdependence, or sacrificial love.	Requires concrete acts of mercy and mutual belonging (Luke 10:25-37).
5. Humanistic: Flourishing	Treats individuals as self-sufficient and morally isolated.	Human beings flourish through community, cooperation, and shared responsibility.
6. Humanistic: Civic Virtue	Reduces obligation to voluntary choice.	Requires empathy, solidarity, and civic virtue to sustain a healthy society.
7. Humanistic: Formation	Offers freedom without formation and autonomy without belonging.	Emphasizes virtue, character, and the moral bonds that make life meaningful.
8. Utilitarian: Well-Being	Prioritizes autonomy even when it harms collective welfare.	Evaluates morality by its capacity to maximize well-being for the greatest number.
9. Utilitarian: Vulnerability	Leaves basic needs to voluntary charity.	Recognizes that coordinated action is necessary to prevent mass suffering.
10. Utilitarian: Social Harm	Produces inequity and weakened social trust.	Requires collective sacrifice and interdependence to achieve optimal outcomes.
11. Synthesis: Framework	Autonomy is the highest moral principle.	Shared Conclusion: Autonomy is valuable but insufficient as a comprehensive moral framework.
12. Synthesis: Vision	Treats humans as isolated individuals.	Alternative: Affirms relational dignity and the fullness of love as the foundation of moral life.

Toward a Final Assessment

Taken together, these converging critiques reveal that the weaknesses of libertarian ethics are not merely theological, nor merely philosophical, nor merely practical, but also structural. When tested against the Christian vision of divine ownership and positive obligation, the humanistic emphasis on relational flourishing, and the utilitarian demand for the promotion of overall well-being, the rights-based libertarian view consistently proves too narrow to sustain the moral weight placed upon it.[249] What initially appears to be a principled defense of individual

[249] Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics.*

liberty ultimately collapses into a morally insufficient account of human responsibility and social life, this recognition then sets the stage for a final assessment: if rights-based libertarian ethics cannot adequately explain things like the nature of moral duty, the meaning of community, or the demands of the common good, then a more comprehensive framework is required. Therefore, Christian moral theology, with its richer anthropology and its robust account of love, stewardship, and interdependence, offers precisely such a framework. The final conclusion will draw these threads together and articulate why the Christian ethic not only critiques libertarianism but surpasses it as a coherent vision of human dignity and moral life.[250]

Reconciliation Between Libertarian and Christian Moral Theology

At this stage one may be primed to ask, "*Is there any common ground at all?*" This reconciliation section proposes to answer that question without undermining any previous or overall critique. Realistically, any possible reconciliation between Libertarian and Christian moral theology begins with the shared recognition of the inherent dignity and worth of the individual. For the Libertarian, this dignity is expressed through the non-aggression principle and the protection of the self from external coercion,[251] while for the Christian, it is rooted in the *imago Dei*, wherein the human person is understood as a sacred creation belonging to God.[252] Common ground between the two also emerges in a shared skepticism toward state-mandated force in that both systems affirm that genuine virtue cannot be compelled by political authority, but rather that any authentic moral action must arise from the free will of the individual.[253] Therefore, by emphasizing subsidiarity (i.e., the principle that social responsibilities should be addressed at the most local level possible) both frameworks can support a social order in which individuals are free from state overreach (Libertarian) so that they may freely form robust, charitable communities of care (Christian).[254]

Thus it is in this middle space that the Libertarian's "freedom from interference" becomes the necessary condition for the Christian's "freedom for excellence and service."[255] Common

---

[250] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 90.

[251] Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty*, 27-35.

[252] Genesis 1:27; Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

[253] Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, ix-x.

[254] Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), §§79-80; see also David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics.*

[255] Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1995), 327-45. Pinckaers' distinction between modern and classical notions of freedom clarifies how libertarian

ground is further found especially within the voluntary sector or civil society (e.g., churches, charities, mutual-aid societies, and other freely formed associations)[256] so that within these institutions, the Christian can fulfill the positive moral obligation to love one's neighbor without violating the Libertarian's negative duty of non-coercion. In other words, by framing the "common good" not as a government-engineered project but as the fruit of a free people choosing to be their "brother's keeper" without legal compulsion, the two systems find a practical harmony.[257]/[258] This combination suggests that while the state should remain minimal to protect liberty, the moral life of the individual should be maximal in its commitment to others creating a form of "libertarian sociality" in which the protection of rights becomes the staging ground for the exercise of radical charity.[259]

"freedom from interference" functions only as a preliminary condition for the richer Christian vision of moral life. Libertarian ethics operates within what Pinckaers calls *freedom of indifference*, where freedom is defined negatively as the absence of coercion, the protection of choice, and the preservation of self-ownership. This creates an empty moral space (i.e., an unobstructed field of options) but offers no guidance for what those options are *for*. Christian moral theology, by contrast, embodies what Pinckaers terms *freedom for excellence*, a teleological understanding in which freedom is ordered toward virtue, love, and the flourishing of others. In this view, noninterference is necessary because one cannot pursue the good under compulsion, yet it is radically insufficient because freedom reaches its fulfillment only in self-gift, service, and communion. Thus, libertarian freedom clears the ground, but Christian freedom builds the house; the former protects the possibility of moral action, while the latter supplies its purpose, direction, and fulfillment.

[256] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 489-95.

[257] Jeremiah 29:7; Philippians 2:3-4; Matthew 25:31-46.

[258] In a democratic society, tax-funded social programs do not represent a private violation of self-ownership but a publicly authorized expression of collective self-governance. While libertarian ethics insists that positive duties must remain voluntary, democratic taxation is not the imposition of one individual's will upon another but the outcome of a political community consenting to shared obligations through legitimate processes of representation and deliberation. Christian moral theology, which affirms both the legitimacy of civil authority and the binding nature of care for the vulnerable, can therefore interpret such programs not as coercive charity but as structural expressions of justice. The voluntary sector remains the arena for personal acts of love, while the state serves as the guarantor of the minimal conditions of human dignity. In this way, democratic governance mediates between libertarian non-coercion and Christian positive obligation, allowing both to coexist within a coherent moral and political framework.

[259] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 99-118. Here Hauerwas argues that Christian ethics cannot be reduced to political structures because the heart of the Christian moral life is the formation of a people whose character is shaped by the practices of Jesus (e.g., mercy, hospitality, forgiveness, and sacrificial love) and while politics can create space for these practices, it cannot produce them. Drawing on Hauerwas's account of Christian moral formation, this synthesis suggests that while the state ought to remain minimal in order to safeguard liberty, the moral life of the individual and the community should be maximal in its commitment to others, thereby creating a form of "libertarian sociality" in which the protection of rights becomes the staging ground for the exercise of radical charity. In such an arrangement, the state refrains from attempting to manufacture virtue, while the church and the broader voluntary sector (e.g., churches, charities, mutual-aid networks, and freely formed associations) embody the practices of mercy, hospitality, and sacrificial generosity that constitute the Christian moral life. For an example, a mid-sized town with limited state welfare but a robust network of faith-based ministries, charitable clinics, mutual-aid societies, and stewardship-minded businesses shows how this model functions in practice (the state protects freedom but civil society fulfills responsibility). Therefore, the common good is not engineered through coercive policy but emerges from a free people choosing to be their "brother's keeper," allowing Christian virtue to flourish precisely within the space secured by libertarian noninterference.

Table 7. Areas of Synthesis and Reconciliation: Libertarian and Christian Moral Theology

Point of Convergence	Libertarian Ethics Perspective	Christian Moral Theology Perspective
Shared Human Dignity	Dignity is expressed through the non-aggression principle and protection from coercion.	Dignity is rooted in the *imago Dei* and the inherent sacredness of every person.
Skepticism of State Force	Coercive state power inherently undermines individual liberty and personal agency.	Genuine virtue cannot be compelled by the state; moral action must arise from free will.
Subsidiarity	Social responsibilities are best handled at the local level to prevent state overreach.	Local communities are the proper, most effective context for charity and moral responsibility.
Orientation of Freedom	Freedom: from interference is the primary moral condition for a just society.	Freedom: for excellence, service, and sacrificial love is the ultimate goal of moral life.
Civil Society	Voluntary associations are the only proper arena for social and economic cooperation.	Churches and charities (including secular) are the natural settings for fulfilling positive moral obligations.
The Common Good	The common good should emerge naturally and not be engineered or forced by the state.	The common good is best realized through freely chosen acts of neighborly love and care.
Practical Synthesis	Minimal State: The state should remain limited to safeguard individual liberty.	Maximal Morality: Individuals should exercise maximal generosity and solidarity within liberty.

Why Autonomy Is Not Enough: A Secular Case for the Ethical Architecture of Christian Moral Theology

Although the preceding analysis has situated the superiority of Christian moral theology within its own theological and philosophical framework, a final objection naturally arises: What relevance does this account hold for those who do not share its theological commitments? In order

to address this concern and to demonstrate that the ethical architecture of Christian moral theology is not merely sectarian but grounded in widely recognized features of human nature, this section turns to the empirical disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and moral philosophy. These fields (operating without appeal to divine revelation or religious thought per se) nevertheless come together on insights that affirm the relational, interdependent, and responsibility-bearing character of human life and society by revealing that autonomy-centered ethics (e.g., rights-based libertarianism) fails not only from a theological standpoint, but also empirically, and that the core moral intuitions embedded within the Christian tradition correspond to the observable realities of human flourishing. Therefore, what follows is a secular case for why autonomy is insufficient and why the relational moral vision articulated by Christian moral theology remains compelling even for the non-Christian (not just for persons of other religious or faith traditions, but also those who claim neither, e.g., the atheist or agnostic). Thus this secular line of inquiry begins (appropriately) with the foundational anthropological claim upon which all subsequent moral reasoning depends, that is, that human beings are inherently relational creatures.

1. Human Beings as Irreducibly Relational: Insights from Anthropology and Evolutionary Psychology

Both secular anthropology and evolutionary psychology converge on a strikingly consistent conclusion, which is that the human person is not an autonomous, self-originating unit but an inherently relational being whose identity, cognition, and moral intuitions emerge within networks of interdependence. Thus, cooperative social structures, shared labor, and reciprocal caregiving *are not accidental features* of human life but the evolutionary conditions that enabled the species to survive and flourish.[260]/[261] A further demonstration is found in social neuroscience

[260] Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 3-18. Tomasello's work deepens this insight by showing that early hominins did not merely *benefit* from cooperation but were *constitutively shaped* by it, such that joint attention, shared intentionality, and collaborative problem-solving became the cognitive scaffolding of human moral life. The very capacities we now associate with moral reasoning (e.g., empathy, fairness judgments, norm enforcement, the ability to take another's perspective, etc.) arose not from isolated individuals maximizing their own self-interest but from small groups whose survival depended on coordinating action, sharing resources, and recognizing mutual obligations. In this light, relationality is not a later cultural overlay on an otherwise self-sufficient creature but the evolutionary matrix out of which personhood itself emerged. Human beings became moral agents precisely because they became *cooperative* agents, and the practices of helping, sharing, and jointly pursuing common goals were not optional enhancements but the adaptive pressures that forged the species.

[261] Evolutionary anthropology explains the biological emergence of human relationality, while the biblical Genesis account provides the theological grammar for understanding that relationality as intrinsic to human identity. Far from being in conflict, the Genesis narrative interprets the same interdependent structure that Tomasello describes,

in that the human brain is structured for empathy, attunement, and mutual responsiveness, revealing that relationality is not just a cultural preference but rather a biological architecture.[262] Developmental psychology likewise also confirms that moral reasoning, emotional regulation, and personal identity arise through stable attachments and communal formation rather than isolated self-determination.[263] These empirical findings undermine ethical systems that treat the individual as a self-sufficient moral monad[264] whose obligations arise solely from voluntary consent, yet instead, these empirical findings actually support a moral anthropology that recognizes relationality, mutual responsibility, and interdependence as intrinsic to human nature. Thus the philosophical scaffolding of Christian moral theology (particularly its relational ontology) aligns closely with the best secular research, even for those who may reject its theological grounding.

2. The Superiority of Positive Obligations: Sociological Evidence for Communal Flourishing

Modern sociological research demonstrates with remarkable clarity that societies organized around positive obligations (e.g., mutual aid, civic responsibility, and shared investment in the common good) consistently exhibit higher levels of social trust, stability, and wellbeing than those

---

portraying relationality not merely as an adaptive strategy but as a divinely intended feature of human nature. Thus when the evolutionary anthropology and the Genesis narrative are placed side by side, they reveal a striking convergence in their accounts of human relationality. Tomasello's research shows that humans evolved through cooperative foraging, shared intentionality, and collaborative problem-solving, while Genesis portrays the first humans placed in a garden to cultivate and steward creation together. Where evolutionary psychology argues that moral cognition emerged from group life (e.g., joint attention, norm enforcement, and mutual dependence), Genesis depicts humans naming creatures, tending the earth, and receiving moral boundaries within a relational context. Likewise, the evolutionary claim that interdependence was adaptive finds its theological counterpart in the divine declaration that "it is not good for the human to be alone." In this way, Genesis functions as a theological interpretation of the same relational structure that evolutionary science describes biologically, presenting human interdependence not merely as an adaptive strategy but as a divinely intended feature of human nature (as noted previously). Some people see the idea of evolution as a threat to religion, however, the author of this research paper sees, when both science and theology are both properly interpreted, no conflict, but rather compliment.

[262] John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 45-67.

[263] John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, vol. 1, *Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 265-303.

[264] A monad (most often associated with Gottfried Leibniz) in its classical philosophical sense, refers to a self-contained, self-sufficient unit whose identity and activity arise entirely from within, without intrinsic dependence on or constitution by relationships. When applied to libertarian anthropology, the term becomes a precise and revealing critique. Rugged individualism imagines the human person as a kind of moral monad, that is an isolated, self-originating agent whose obligations emerge only from voluntary choice and whose identity is internally defined rather than relationally constituted. This stands in sharp contrast to both evolutionary anthropology, which shows that humans became moral agents through cooperation, shared intentionality, and interdependence, and the Genesis narrative, which portrays humanity as created for communion with God, with one another, and with creation itself. In both scientific and theological accounts, relationality is not an optional enhancement but the very matrix of human existence, making the monadic self a philosophical fiction that obscures the fundamentally communal nature of human life.

structured solely around non-interference.[265] Communities with robust "social capital" tend to experience lower crime, stronger economic resilience, and greater public health, while cultures dominated by rugged individualism tend toward fragmentation, loneliness, and declining civic participation.[266] These empirical patterns show that negative duties alone cannot sustain the complex moral ecology required for human flourishing. In other words, a moral framework that incorporates positive duties (e.g., responsibility for the vulnerable, participation in communal life, and active pursuit of shared goods, etc.) better reflects the sociological realities of human interdependence. Thus the ethical framework of Christian moral theology, with its emphasis on mutual care and communal responsibility, mirrors what secular sociology identifies as the structural conditions of a healthy society, even apart from its theological commitments.[267]

3. Psychological Well-being and the Necessity of Altruism

Contemporary psychology consistently affirms that human well-being is not maximized through radical autonomy but through altruism, prosocial behavior, and self-transcendent purpose. Research in positive psychology shows that generosity, caregiving, and acts of service reliably increase happiness, reduce anxiety, and strengthen a person's resilience.[268] For example, Viktor Frankl's existential analysis along with empirical studies by Seligman, Baumeister, and others, shows that meaning in life is most deeply experienced when individuals orient themselves toward goods *beyond the self*.[269] This self-transcendence which is expressed through responsibility,

---

[265] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 287-302.

[266] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 142-48.

[267] Recognizing the sociological insight with Genesis and early Israelite history is to recognize that the biblical narrative already assumes the very patterns of relational interdependence that modern research now empirically confirms. Genesis does not imagine humans as isolated moral units but as beings whose identity and vocation unfold within networks of relationship showing male and female together bearing the divine image, families forming the basic social structure, and communal stewardship of creation defining human labor. Early Israelite society reinforces this relational anthropology through its kinship-based identity, covenantal obligations, and legally mandated positive duties such as gleaning, debt release, and protection of widows, orphans, and foreigners. These practices institutionalize mutual care and social responsibility as essential features of communal life rather than optional acts of generosity. When modern sociology demonstrates that societies with strong social capital, shared obligations, and communal investment exhibit greater trust, stability, and well-being, it is essentially describing in empirical terms what the biblical tradition presents theologically, in essence, that human flourishing depends on relational bonds, shared responsibility, and the pursuit of the common good. Therefore, far from conflicting with Genesis or early Israelite history, contemporary sociological findings illuminate the enduring wisdom of a scriptural vision in which interdependence is not a constraint on human freedom but the very condition of a healthy and thriving community.

[268] Martin E. P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 19-45.

[269] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 97-115. Frankl's analysis shows with stark clarity that meaning arises not from self-absorption but from self-transcendence, that is, orienting

sacrifice, and contribution to others, is not just a religious ideal but a psychological necessity. Again, these findings challenge ethical systems that would reduce moral life to personal liberty or voluntary contract, showing instead that stable commitments to others and participation in shared moral goods are essential for human flourishing. In sum, Christian moral theology's emphasis on self-giving love and stewardship thus corresponds closely with the psychological structure of human wellbeing, even for those who do not accept its theological premises.[270]

4. Philosophical Limits of Autonomy-Only Ethics

Here we point out that secular moral philosophy also increasingly recognizes that autonomy-centered ethics cannot sustain a coherent account of human moral life. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre's depiction of humans as "dependent rational animals," Charles Taylor's analysis of socially constituted identity, and the capabilities approach developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen all converge on the insight that human beings require relational and

---

one's life toward a person, purpose, or responsibility *beyond the self*. His observations in the camps revealed that those who endured were sustained not by inward focus or self-preservation, but by devotion to something larger than their immediate suffering. Contemporary psychological research confirms this pattern: Seligman's work on well-being (Seligman, Martin E. P., *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. New York: Free Press, 2011), Baumeister's studies on meaningful lives (Baumeister, Roy F., Kathleen D. Vohs, Jennifer L. Aaker, and Emily N. Garbinsky. "Some Key Differences Between a Happy Life and a Meaningful Life." *Journal of Positive Psychology* 8, no. 6 (2013): 505-516), and broader findings in positive psychology consistently demonstrate that meaning is strongest when individuals commit themselves to relationships, service, long-term goals, and contributions to the common good. Together, Frankl and modern empirical studies converge on a single point: human beings experience their deepest sense of meaning not by maximizing autonomy, but by giving themselves to goods that transcend the self.

[270] A coherent reconciliation emerges once we recognize that both Genesis and the New Testament church articulate a vision of human life that assumes precisely the relational, prosocial, and self-transcendent structure contemporary psychology now documents empirically. In Genesis, the first humans are created *in relation,* that is, male and female together bearing the divine image, placed in a garden to cultivate and guard it, and immediately embedded in a network of mutual responsibility. The first negative judgment in Scripture ("it is not good for the human to be alone") signals that isolation is contrary to human nature, and the commands to be fruitful, to steward creation, and to live in covenantal fellowship all presuppose that flourishing arises through shared life rather than solitary autonomy. Early Israelite society reinforces this anthropology through kinship bonds, communal obligations, and legal structures that require care for the vulnerable, making prosocial responsibility a normative feature of human existence rather than an optional virtue. The New Testament church intensifies this relational vision recording that the earliest Christian communities are described as sharing possessions, bearing one another's burdens, practicing hospitality, and understanding themselves as members of one body whose well-being is inseparable from the well-being of others. The moral center of Christian life (agapē, self-giving love) requires precisely the kind of self-transcendence that contemporary psychology identifies as essential for meaning, resilience, and well-being. As noted, what Frankl observed in the camps and what Seligman, Baumeister, and others have demonstrated empirically (i.e., that humans thrive when they give themselves to purposes beyond the self) corresponds directly to the biblical claim that life is found in losing oneself for the sake of God and neighbor. Thus, rather than standing in tension with Genesis or the early church, modern psychological research actually illuminates the deep wisdom of the biblical vision, i.e., human beings are not designed for radical autonomy but for communion, responsibility, and shared moral purpose. The practices that Scripture presents as expressions of faith (e.g., generosity, sacrifice, mutual care, stewardship) are the very practices that contemporary science now recognizes as the psychological conditions of human flourishing.

communal structures to flourish.[271] The area of care ethics further shows that moral obligations arise not merely from contracts but from the inherent dependencies embedded in human existence.[272] Autonomy-only frameworks struggle to account for duties to children, the elderly, the disabled, or future generations, as well as proving to be inadequate in addressing structural injustice or collective action problems. An example would be the care of elderly parents. In an autonomy-only framework (where moral duties arise solely from voluntary choice) it cannot easily explain why adult children have any binding responsibility to care for aging parents who can no longer live independently. Thus if obligations exist only where individuals freely contract them, then no one is morally required to provide time, resources, or emotional labor for a parent whose *needs are unchosen and often burdensome*. However, in real life, nearly every culture recognizes that caring for the elderly is a genuine moral duty, and not necessarily a matter of personal preference and meeting these needs typically requires sustained sacrifice, coordination among siblings, other family members and maybe close friends, as well as long-term commitments that far exceed what an autonomy-only ethic can justify. Therefore, the situation makes clear that human life is structured by asymmetric dependencies in that we owe care to those who once cared for us, even though neither party ever "agreed" to the arrangement. It is this everyday reality that exposes the limits of autonomy-based ethics and highlights the necessity of positive, relational obligations for sustaining a humane society.

Ultimately, a moral system that incorporates relational identity, inherent obligations, and the common good is therefore philosophically stronger and more comprehensive. Here we highlight again that a Christian moral theology provides such a framework, and its philosophical coherence can, and does, stand independently of its theological claims.

5. Stewardship as a Secularly Sustainable Ethical Paradigm

---

[271] MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals,* 1-22. See also, Sen, Amartya Sen. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

[272] Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10-32. Care ethics, as Held presents it, begins from the basic fact that human life is sustained through relationships of dependence and responsibility, making care (and not abstract principles or autonomous choice) the primary lens for moral reflection. Rather than grounding ethics in rights, contracts, or impartial rules, care ethics emphasizes the moral centrality of attentiveness, empathy, responsiveness, and the maintenance of relationships, arguing that these practices are foundational to both personal development and social life. Because every person enters the world vulnerable and reliant on others, *care becomes a structural moral necessity*, extending from intimate relationships to political institutions and even global contexts.

Turning to environmental ethics, sustainability science, and political ecology, all three affirm that models of absolute ownership (where individuals possess unrestricted dominion over resources) tend to produce ecological degradation, resource exhaustion, and long-term social instability.[273] A real-life example is groundwater depletion in agricultural regions. When landowners are treated as having absolute, unrestricted rights to pump as much water as they wish from aquifers beneath their property, each individual actor has an incentive to maximize short-term extraction. However, because aquifers are shared ecological systems, this autonomy-only model inevitably leads to rapid depletion, declining water tables, land subsidence, and long-term instability for entire communities. And while no single farmer intends harm, the absence of shared limits or positive obligations to steward the resource produces collective degradation. Sustainability science, environmental ethics, and political ecology all point to this same pattern, that is, when resources are governed solely by private dominion rather than cooperative responsibility, ecosystems deteriorate and communities suffer. This everyday example illustrates how absolute ownership fails to account for the interdependence of ecological systems and the shared responsibilities required to sustain them. In contrast, stewardship models, which frame resources as held in trust for others and for future generations, promote sustainability, equitable distribution, and ecological resilience.[274] These findings reveal that human flourishing depends on recognizing the interdependence of individuals, communities, and ecosystems. A simple, everyday example is community gardens. When neighborhoods treat shared green space as a resource held in trust (e.g., tending the soil together, rotating harvests, caring for the land with future seasons in mind, etc.) the garden stays healthy, productive, and accessible to everyone. However, when no one feels responsible beyond their own immediate use, the space quickly becomes depleted or neglected. Thus this small-scale case illustrates how stewardship models naturally promote sustainability and shared well-being. Therefore, a stewardship-oriented ethic encourages responsibility, restraint, and care for shared goods, aligning with empirical evidence about what sustains both human and environmental well-being. Christian moral theology's stewardship paradigm thus mirrors the conclusions of secular environmental research, offering a

[273] Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243-48.
[274] Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 88-102.

philosophically robust alternative to ownership-absolutism that remains compelling even without theological commitments.[275]

6. Interdependence as the Only Ethic Capable of Addressing Modern Moral Challenges

Many of the most pressing moral and social challenges such as public health, environmental protection, disability justice, care for dependents, and structural inequality, cannot be adequately addressed within a framework that recognizes *only* negative duties and voluntary obligations.[276] A clear, everyday example is public health immunization programs. Vaccines protect individuals, but their real effectiveness depends on herd immunity, which only emerges when communities act together. No single person, acting autonomously, can create the conditions that prevent outbreaks; the benefit exists only when many people accept a shared responsibility for one another's well-being. Infants, the elderly, and the immunocompromised (who cannot always choose or consent) depend entirely on this communal protection. This simple case shows that some of the most basic goods of modern life arise not from non-interference or voluntary contracts, but from inherent obligations and coordinated care, illustrating why interdependence is the only ethic capable of meeting real human needs. Furthermore, collective action problems such as climate change, pandemics, and economic instability require coordinated responsibility and shared sacrifice and not merely non-interference. Likewise, the needs of children, the elderly, and the disabled cannot be met through contract-based ethics, since these individuals *often cannot enter voluntary agreements*. Therefore, a moral system that acknowledges inherent obligations, relational identity, and communal responsibility is therefore better equipped to address the actual realities of human life. Again, Christian moral theology offers such a framework, yet here, its usefulness does not depend on accepting its theological premises, but rather it simply aligns with the empirical structure of human social existence.

7. The Rational Appropriation of Christian Ethical Architecture by Non-Believers

---

[275] Christian moral theology fits naturally with this stewardship ethic because Scripture consistently portrays creation as *a gift entrusted, not a possession to exploit*. Humans are called to use resources responsibly, practice restraint, and care for the good of others and future generations. This mirrors empirical research showing that stewardship (rather than ownership without limits) best sustains human and environmental well-being. In this way, the Christian vision offers a philosophically robust alternative to ownership absolutism that remains compelling even without its theological foundations.

[276] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 96-134.

Because the relational anthropology, positive obligations, stewardship ethic, and common-good orientation found in Christian moral theology align so closely with secular findings in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and moral philosophy, a non-Christian can appropriate the framework's ethical structure without accepting its theological claims. In this sense, a person need not affirm divine ownership in order to recognize that human beings are interdependent, that flourishing requires mutual responsibility and that one's moral life extends beyond voluntary contracts. The philosophical architecture of Christian moral theology can therefore be adopted on purely rational, empirical grounds as a coherent and effective model for human moral life. And although its theological content may be rejected, its ethical insights remain compelling because they correspond to the observable realities of human nature and social existence.[277]/[278]

Why Autonomy Is Not Enough: A Secular Case for the Ethical Architecture of Christian Moral Theology - Final Summary

The aforementioned seven considerations, when taken together, demonstrate that the core philosophical framework of Christian moral theology (its relational anthropology, emphasis on positive obligations, stewardship ethic, and commitment to the common good) corresponds closely with what secular research already affirms about human beings and human flourishing. Anthropology reveals that humans are inherently relational; sociology shows that communities thrive through mutual responsibility; psychology confirms that altruism and self-transcendence promote wellbeing; moral philosophy exposes the limitations of autonomy-only ethics; and environmental science and political theory further reinforce the necessity of stewardship and shared responsibility. Thus, even without appealing to theological authority, the basic structure of

---

[277] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3-52.

[278] Christian moral theology can be described as an empirically grounded ethical system in the sense that, although its ultimate foundations are theological, its core moral claims are independently corroborated by the human sciences. Its relational anthropology aligns with empirical research in anthropology, sociology, and psychology showing that human beings are inherently social, interdependent, and formed through networks of mutual care. Its affirmation of positive moral obligations corresponds to evidence that prosocial behavior, cooperative norms, and mutual responsibility are essential for individual and communal flourishing. Its stewardship ethic mirrors ecological and sociological findings that responsible use of resources and intergenerational concern are necessary for sustainable social life. Its orientation toward the common good reflects political-philosophical and social-scientific insights that human wellbeing cannot be reduced to individual autonomy but requires shared institutions, reciprocal responsibility, and communal bonds. Because these ethical conclusions match observable features of human nature and social existence, a non-Christian can appropriate the moral architecture of Christian theology without accepting its theological premises. In this way, Christian moral theology functions as a system whose normative claims are theologically motivated yet empirically validated, offering a coherent and compelling model of moral life accessible across both religious and secular contexts.

Christian moral theology emerges as a rational, empirically grounded, and philosophically coherent ethical framework as one that offers significant benefits to both believers and non-believers alike.

Conclusion: Final Theological and Normative Synthesis

In light of the foregoing analysis, it becomes clear that libertarian, rights-based ethics, despite its own internal coherence and its appeal to modern views of autonomy, cannot sustain a robust, strong or even adequate account of human moral life. Since it seeks to ground any kind of personal responsibility solely in voluntary consent and by reducing moral obligation to non-interference, rights-based libertarian ethics collapses the moral landscape into a narrow concern for personal liberty and autonomy. And while this kind of a framework may protect individuals from coercion, it cannot explain why human beings ought to care for one another, why communities matter, or why the vulnerable deserve more than just a passive tolerance. In turn, its anthropology is too thin, its moral vision too limited, and its understanding of human relationships too transactional to address the full depth of human need or the moral demands of life together.[279] In contrast, theological ethics offers a far richer and more compelling vision by recognizing the human person as created, loved, and entrusted with gifts for the sake of others, thus the Christian ethic does not deny the value of freedom, but it does refuse to absolutize autonomy at the expense of love. This theological ethic insists that human beings are not isolated moral units (or "monads" as we have previously described) but rather members of one another, being bound together by divine design and called to bear one another's burdens. In this vision, responsibility is not seen as an imposition but rather as a vocation, and generosity is not some kind of voluntary add-on but a reflection of God's own character. Furthermore, the common good is not simply a by-product of each individual's pursuits but rather a shared moral project that is deeply rooted in justice, charity, and rightly ordered loves.[280]

Thus, the Christian ethic provides a moral grammar[281] capable of addressing the complexities of real human life by recognizing that suffering, vulnerability, and need are not

---

[279] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

[280] Augustine, *City of God*, XIX; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 23-26.

[281] When we use the term "moral grammar" we are referring to the underlying structure of moral reasoning, that is the deep, often unspoken rules that shape how people judge right and wrong. Just as linguistic grammar governs how we form sentences without thinking, moral grammar governs how we form ethical judgments, guiding what we see as duties, what we count as harm, and what we believe we owe to others. It includes intuitive moral principles,

anomalies to be ignored but rather they are invitations to embody Christlike love. In addition, it understands that any meaningful moral formation requires more than just the protection of rights, it also requires the cultivation of virtues (e.g., humility, patience, generosity, courage, etc.) that shape both individuals and communities into reflections of God's kingdom. Where libertarian ethics offers freedom from obligation, theological ethics offers freedom for love, and where libertarianism sees the neighbor as a voluntary partner, Christianity sees the neighbor as a divine appointment in the sense that the people who cross one's path are not random, optional, or merely voluntary relationships, but rather they are encounters in which God Himself places a claim upon the believer. The neighbor is thus understood as someone God has intentionally set before another, someone whose presence creates a real moral responsibility grounded in divine command rather than personal choice. In this view, caring for one's neighbor is not an act of discretionary generosity but a response to God's initiative, i.e., the neighbor is given, not chosen; entrusted, not selected; and encountered as part of one's vocation to love. Thus, where libertarianism seeks to minimize demands, Christianity seeks to maximize love.[282]

For these reasons, the Christian moral tradition therefore stands as the more persuasive and theologically grounded framework for understanding human dignity, moral duty, and social responsibility. Not only does it reveal the limitations of autonomy-centered ethics but it also provides a vision capable of sustaining genuine community, protecting the vulnerable, and forming persons who reflect the character of Christ. In a world increasingly shaped by polarization, individualism, and moral fragmentation, the Christian ethic offers not only an alternative but a solid foundation as a way of life that is rooted in love, ordered toward the common good, and grounded in the God who calls His people (and all of humanity) to serve one another in freedom and joy.[283]/[284]

---

patterns of reasoning, and foundational assumptions about persons, responsibility, and the good. In this comparative study (i.e., contrasting rights-based libertarian ethics with Christian moral theology) the term highlights that each system operates with its own internal logic. Libertarianism builds its moral grammar on self-ownership and negative duties, while Christian ethics builds its grammar on divine ownership, relational anthropology, and positive obligations of love.

[282] Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

[283] Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*.

[284] Christian ethics offers a strikingly different vision of moral life in a world marked by polarization, individualism, and fragmentation. Rather than grounding responsibility in personal autonomy or voluntary choice, the New Testament consistently frames human life as relational, communal, and ordered toward the good of others. Passages such as Romans 12:10, Philippians 2:3-4, and Galatians 5:13 reveal a moral grammar rooted in self-giving love, humility, and service (e.g., virtues that redirect freedom away from self-protection and toward the flourishing of

one's neighbor). Likewise, 1 Peter 4:10 and James 1:27 emphasize that one's gifts, resources, and labor are entrusted by God for the sake of the vulnerable and the community, not for isolated self-possession. Hebrews 10:24 further underscores that moral formation itself is a shared endeavor, as believers "stir up one another to love and good works." Together, these texts present a coherent and compelling alternative to autonomy-centered ethics, that is, a way of life that is grounded in divine calling, sustained by mutual responsibility, and expressed through joyful service for the common good.

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

Absolutism (Ethical)

The view that certain moral principles or actions are universally binding, exceptionless, and intrinsically right or wrong regardless of circumstances. Used in the paper to contrast Christian moral norms with Fletcher's situational ethics.
See also: *Noncontradiction; Moral Reality.*

Absolutism (Ownership)

The libertarian claim that individuals possess absolute, inviolable ownership over themselves, their bodies, and their labor. Rejects any inherent claims others may have on one's resources or abilities.
See also: *Self-Ownership; Rights Absolutism; Monad.*

Agapē (Christian Love)

A theological virtue grounded in God's character, expressed through self-giving love ordered toward the good of the other.
See also: *Neighbor; Positive Duties; Moral Imagination.*

Anthropological-Ontological Absolutism

A combined category describing how libertarianism absolutizes a particular conception of the human person as a self-contained, self-determining monad and treats this individual as the fundamental unit of moral and social reality.
See also: *Monad; Being; Ontology; Moral Unit.*

Anthropology (Moral/Theological)

A framework describing what it means to be human. Libertarian anthropology emphasizes independence and self-ownership; Christian anthropology emphasizes relationality and divine ownership.
See also: *Imago Dei; Interdependence; Ecclesial Self.*

Autarky (αὐτάρκεια)

Self-sufficiency or independence. Used to describe the libertarian ideal of the self as morally self-contained.
See also: *Autonomy; Monad.*

Autonomy (Moral)

The belief that individuals possess self-ownership and are responsible only for themselves unless they voluntarily assume obligations.
See also: *Self-Ownership; Voluntary Obligation.*

Being

The fundamental fact of existence. In Christian theology, being is received from God and inherently relational; in libertarian thought, being is often treated as self-possessed and self-determining.
See also: *Ontology; Ontological Being; Monad.*

Christian (or Religious) Nationalism

A sociopolitical ideology that fuses national identity with Christian identity, often claiming divine sanction for national priorities.
See also: *Common Good; Ecclesial Self.*

Christian Moral Theology

The ethical tradition rooted in Scripture and the early Church Fathers, emphasizing divine ownership, positive obligations of love, stewardship, virtue formation, and the common good.
See also: *Positive Duties; Stewardship; Imago Dei.*

Collectivism (Hard)

A system in which the group or state possesses priority over the individual, often asserting coercive claims on individual labor or autonomy.
See also: *Collectivism (Soft); Common Good.*

Collectivism (Soft)

Affirms communal responsibility and shared goods without fully subordinating individual autonomy to the group.
See also: *Common Good; Interdependence.*

Common Good

In Christian theology, a shared moral project oriented toward justice, charity, and the flourishing of all.
See also: *Positive Duties; Interdependence; Stewardship.*

Consent (Moral Source of Obligation)

In libertarian ethics, the only legitimate basis for moral duties.
See also: *Voluntary Obligation; Autonomy.*

Ecclesial Self

A Christian understanding of personhood shaped by belonging to God, the Body of Christ, and the human community.
See also: *Interdependence; Koinōnia; Imago Dei.*

Epistemic–Methodological Absolutism

A combined category describing how libertarianism treats self-ownership and rights as unquestionable axioms (epistemic) and reduces all moral reasoning to a single test: non-interference (methodological).
See also: *Rights Absolutism; Negative Absolutism.*

FOUNDATION Framework

The comparative structure used in the paper to contrast libertarian ethics with Christian moral theology.
See also: *Anthropology; Obligations; Common Good; Interdependence.*

Imago Dei

The doctrine that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God.
See also: *Anthropology; Moral Reality; Neighbor.*

Interdependence (Human)

The Christian belief that human beings are inherently connected and morally responsible for one another.
See also: *Koinōnia; Positive Duties; Ecclesial Self.*

Koinōnia (κοινωνία)

Communion, fellowship, or shared participation.
See also: *Interdependence; Ecclesial Self.*

Labor (Moral Status of)

In libertarian ethics, labor belongs exclusively to the individual; in Christian theology, labor is a gift entrusted for service and generosity.
See also: *Stewardship; Self-Ownership.*

Libertarian Ethics

A rights-based ethical system grounded in self-ownership, negative duties, and autonomy.
See also: *Self-Ownership; Negative Duties; Voluntary Obligation.*

Monad (Moral/Anthropological)

A self-contained, closed moral unit that exists independently of external claims or relationships.
See also: *Anthropological-Ontological Absolutism; Self-Ownership; Moral Unit.*

Moral Flourishing

Holistic human well-being grounded in virtue, right relationship, and participation in the common good.
See also: *Common Good; Moral Imagination.*

Moral Grammar

The underlying structure of moral reasoning that shapes how individuals interpret duties and the moral significance of others.
See also: *Moral Reality; Moral Imagination.*

Moral Imagination

The capacity to perceive the moral significance of situations and persons beyond self-interest.
See also: *Neighbor; Agapē; Moral Flourishing.*

Moral Reality

The objective moral order that exists independently of preference or consent.
See also: *Ontology; Imago Dei.*

Moral Unit

The basic locus of moral agency. Libertarianism treats the individual as the moral unit; Christianity treats the person as relational and accountable to God and neighbor.
See also: *Monad; Interdependence.*

Negative Absolutism (Negative-Duty Absolutism)

The elevation of negative duties to absolute status while rejecting positive duties as optional.
See also: *Negative Duties; Rights Absolutism.*

Negative Duties

Obligations not to harm, coerce, or interfere with others.
See also: *Negative Absolutism; Libertarian Ethics.*

Neighbor (Moral Understanding of)

In libertarian ethics, a rights-bearing individual with no inherent claim on one's labor; in Christian theology, someone to whom one owes active love and care.
See also: *Agapē; Positive Duties.*

Noncontradiction (Principle of)

A logical principle stating that contradictory claims cannot both be true.
See also: *Absolutism (Ethical); Situation Ethics.*

Ontology

The philosophical study of being and the structure of reality.
See also: *Being; Ontological Being; Ontological Reality.*

Ontological Being

The mode of existing as a creature with inherent nature, purpose, and relational identity.
See also: *Being; Ontology.*

Ontological Reality

The nature of being itself, what is real, independent of perception or preference.
See also: *Ontology; Moral Reality.*

Perichōrēsis (περιχώρησις)

The mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity.
See also: *Koinōnia; Ecclesial Self.*

Political Absolutism (Inverted)

A form of absolutism in which the individual, not the state, is treated as the absolute sovereign.
See also: *Self-Ownership; Rights Absolutism.*

Positive Duties

Obligations to actively help, serve, or care for others.
See also: *Neighbor; Interdependence.*

Rights Absolutism

The treatment of individual rights as inviolable and exceptionless.
See also: *Absolutism (Ownership); Negative Absolutism.*

Rugged Individualism

A cultural ideal emphasizing self-reliance and minimal social obligation.
See also: *Autonomy; Monad.*

Self-Ownership

The libertarian principle that individuals own themselves, their bodies, and their labor absolutely.
See also: *Absolutism (Ownership); Monad; Voluntary Obligation.*

Situation Ethics

Joseph Fletcher's theory claiming that "love" is the sole absolute norm, with all other rules relative to circumstances.
See also: *Noncontradiction; Moral Reality.*

Stewardship

The Christian belief that one's abilities, resources, and labor are entrusted by God for the sake of others.
See also: *Labor; Common Good.*

Utilitarianism (Hard)

A consequentialist system asserting that moral rightness is determined solely by maximizing utility, even at the expense of rights.
See also: *Utilitarianism (Soft).*

Utilitarianism (Soft)

A moderated form of utilitarianism that seeks to maximize utility while retaining some moral constraints.
See also: *Utilitarianism (Hard).*

Voluntary Obligation

The idea that moral duties arise only through consent or contract.
See also: *Autonomy; Self-Ownership.*

Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999.

Augustine. *City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Classics, 2003.
———. *On Christian Doctrine*. Translated by D. W. Robertson Jr. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958.
———. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Edited by John E. Rotelle. Translated by Edmund Hill. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990.

Basil the Great. *On Social Justice*. Translated by C. Paul Schroeder. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009.

Baumeister, Roy F., and Mark R. Leary. "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497-529.

Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.

Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 1, Attachment*. New York: Basic Books, 1969.

Cacioppo, John T., and William Patrick. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

Chrysostom, John. *Homilies on First Corinthians*. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 12, edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
———. *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*. In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 10, edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
———. *On Wealth and Poverty*. Translated by Catharine P. Roth. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.

Dominelli, Lena. *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Du Mez, Kristin Kobes. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York: Liveright, 2020.

Durkheim, Émile. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press, 1997.

Fletcher, Joseph. *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966.

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning,* Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1970.

Fukuyama, Francis. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press, 1995.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Geisler, Norman L. *Christian Ethics: Options and Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989.

Hardin, Garrett. "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162, no. 3859 (1968): 1243-48.

Hauerwas, Stanley. *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Moral Theology*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Havel, Václav. "The Power of the Powerless." In *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, edited by Paul Wilson, 125-214. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Hayek, Friedrich A. *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Hollenbach, David. *The Common Good and Christian Moral Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Yale Bible Commentary 37A. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.

John of Damascus. *De Fide Orthodoxa*. In *St. John of Damascus: Writings*, translated by Frederic H. Chase Jr. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958.

Kirst-Ashman, Karen K., and Grafton H. Hull Jr. *Understanding Generalist Practice*. 9th ed. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2018.

Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000.

Kołakowski, Leszek. *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Kottak, Conrad Phillip. *Cultural Anthropology: Appreciating Cultural Diversity*. 18th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2019.

Leary, Mark R. See Baumeister, Roy F.

Lipsky, Michael. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. 30th Anniversary Expanded Edition. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010.

Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Edited by Peter Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

———. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago: Open Court, 1999.

Malina, Bruce J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. 3rd ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

Maritain, Jacques. *The Person and the Common Good*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1947.

Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism*. Edited by George Sher. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001.

National Association of Social Workers. *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, DC: NASW Press, 2021.

Neyrey, Jerome H. *Paul, In Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books, 1974.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Patrick, William. See Cacioppo, John T.

Perry, Samuel L., and Andrew L. Whitehead. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Pinckaers, Servais. *The Sources of Christian Ethics*. Translated by Mary Thomas Noble. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995.

Pius XI, Pope. *Quadragesimo Anno (On Reconstruction of the Social Order)*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1931.

Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Rand, Ayn. *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New York: Signet, 1964.

Reamer, Frederic G. *Social Work Values and Ethics*. 6th ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Rothbard, Murray. *The Ethics of Liberty*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Sandel, Michael. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Singer, Peter. *Practical Ethics*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
———. *The Life You Can Save: Acting Now to End World Poverty*. New York: Random House, 2009.

Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation. Volume 1*. Translated by Thomas P. Whitney. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

Taylor, Charles. “Atomism.” In *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
———. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
———. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Tomasello, Michael. *A Natural History of Human Morality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Turner, Jonathan H. *Human Institutions: A Theory of Societal Evolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Justice in Love*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

About the Author

Kenneth J. Howell, Th.D., holds a research doctorate in theology and ethics. His dissertation, *Reality, Rationalism, and Reason*, offers a systematic examination of Jesus the Christ through the integrated lenses of theology, philosophy, moral-ethical theory, and historically grounded analysis. His scholarship focuses on the relationship between Christian moral theology, the formation of moral character, and the underlying philosophical assumptions that shape ethical reasoning. Drawing extensively on Scripture, the early Church Fathers, and the classical philosophical tradition, his work explores how religion, reality, and reason function as mutually correlative dimensions of a coherent worldview. His research emphasizes the recovery of virtue-centered ethics and the development of the moral life within a theologically grounded account of human dignity and responsibility.